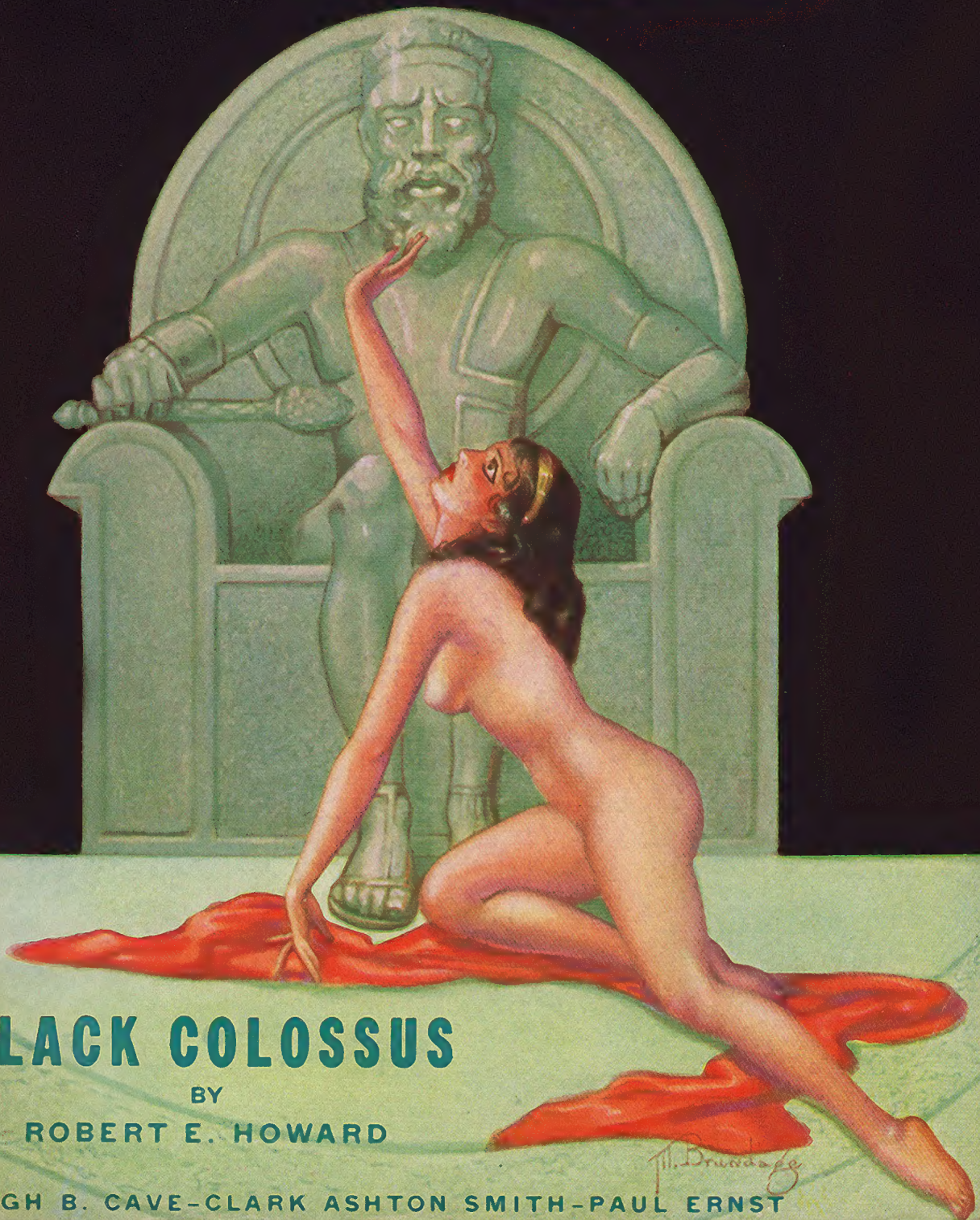
JUNE—25c

Weird Tales



BLACK COLOSSUS

BY

ROBERT E. HOWARD

HUGH B. CAVE—CLARK ASHTON SMITH—PAUL ERNST

JUNE, 1933

WEIRD TALES

Vol. 21, No. 6—25c

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Weird Tales

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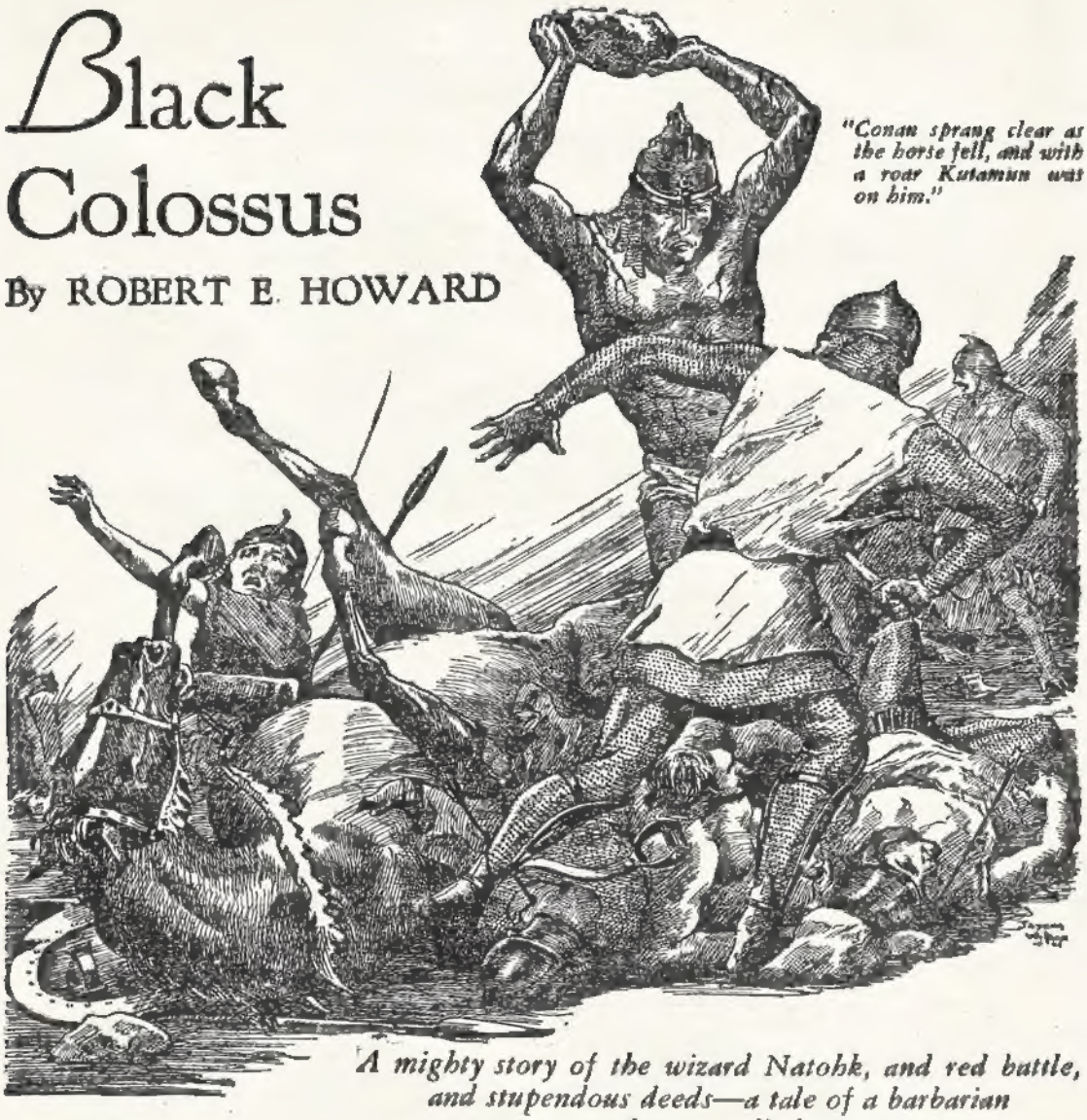
Black Colossus

By ROBERT E. HOWARD



"Conan sprang clear as the horse fell, and with a roar Kutamun was on him."

A mighty story of the wizard Natohk, and red battle, and stupendous deeds—a tale of a barbarian mercenary who was called upon to save a nation from shuddery evil

"The Night of Power, when Fate stalked through the corridors of the world like a colossus just risen from an age-old throne of granite——"
E. Hoffmann Price: *The Girl From Samarcand.*

ONLY the age-old silence brooded over the mysterious ruins of Kuthchemes, but Fear was there; Fear quivered in the mind of Shevatas, the thief, driving his breath quick and sharp against his clenched teeth.

He stood, the one atom of life amidst the colossal monuments of desolation and decay. Not even a vulture hung like a black dot in the vast blue vault of the sky that the sun glazed with its heat. On every hand rose the grim relics of another, forgotten age: huge broken pillars, thrusting up their jagged pinnacles into the sky; long wavering lines of crumbling walls; fallen cyclopean blocks of stone; shattered images, whose horrific features the corroding winds and dust-storms had half erased. From horizon to horizon no sign

of life: only the sheer breath-taking sweep of the naked desert, bisected by the wandering line of a long-dry river-course; in the midst of that vastness the glimmering fangs of the ruins, the columns standing up like broken masts of sunken ships—all dominated by the towering ivory dome before which Shevatas stood trembling.

The base of this dome was a gigantic pedestal of marble rising from what had once been a terraced eminence on the banks of the ancient river. Broad steps led up to a great bronze door in the dome, which rested on its base like the half of some titanic egg. The dome itself was of pure ivory, which shone as if unknown hands kept it polished. Likewise shone the spired gold cap of the pinnacle, and the inscription which sprawled about the curve of the dome in golden hieroglyphics yards long. No man on earth could read those characters, but Shevatas shuddered at the dim conjectures they raised. For he came of a very old race, whose myths ran back to shapes undreamed of bv contemporary tribes.

Shevatas was wiry and lithe, as became a master-thief of Zamora. His small round head was shaven, his only garment a loin-cloth of scarlet silk. Like all his race, he was very dark, his narrow vulture-like face set off by his keen black eyes. His long, slender and tapering fingers were quick and nervous as the wings of a moth. From a gold-scaled girdle hung a short, narrow, jewel-hilted sword in a sheath of ornamented leather. Shevatas handled the weapon with apparently exaggerated care. He even seemed to flinch away from the contact of the sheath with his naked thigh. Nor was his care without reason.

This was Shevatas, a thief among thieves, whose name was spoken with awe in the dives of the Maul and the dim shadowy recesses beneath the temples of Bel, and who lived in songs and myths for a thousand years. Yet fear ate at the heart of Shevatas as he stood before the ivory dome of Kuthchemes. Any fool could see there was something unnatural about the structure; the winds and suns of three thousand years had lashed it, yet its gold and ivory rose bright and glistening as the day it was reared by nameless hands on the bank of the nameless river.

This unnaturalness was in keeping with the general aura of these devil-haunted ruins. This desert was the mysterious expanse lying southeast of the lands of Shem. A few days' ride on camel-back to the southwest, as Shevatas knew, would bring the traveller within sight of the great river Styx at the point where it turned at right angles with its former course, and flowed westward to empty at last into the distant sea. At the point of its bend began the land of Stygia, the dark-bosomed mistress of the south, whose domains, watered by the great river, rose sheer out of the surrounding desert.

Eastward, Shevatas knew, the desert shaded into steppes stretching to the Hyrcanian kingdom of Turan, rising in barbaric splendor on the shores of the great inland sea. A week's ride northward the desert ran into a tangle of barren hills, beyond which lay the fertile uplands of Koth, the southernmost realm of the Hyborian races. Westward the desert merged into the meadowlands of Shem, which stretched away to the ocean.

All this Shevatas knew without being particularly conscious of the knowledge, as a man knows the streets of his town. He was a far traveller and had looted the treasures of many kingdoms. But now he hesitated and shuddered before the highest adventure and the mightiest treasure of all.

In that ivory dome lay the bones of Thugra Khotan, the dark sorcerer who

had reigned in Kuthchemes three thousand years ago, when the kingdoms of Stygia stretched far northward of the great river, over the meadows of Shem, and into the uplands. Then the great drift of the Hyborians swept southward from the cradle-land of their race near the northern pole. It was a titanic drift, extending over centuries and ages. But in the reign of Thugra Khotan, the last magician of Kuthchemes, gray-eyed, tawny-haired barbarians in wolfskins and scale-mail had ridden from the north into the rich uplands to carve out the kingdom of Koth with their iron swords. They had stormed over Kuthchemes like a tidal wave, washing the marble towers in blood, and the northern Stygian kingdom had gone down in fire and ruin.

But while they were shattering the streets of his city and cutting down his archers like ripe corn, Thugra Khotan had swallowed a strange terrible poison, and his masked priests had locked him into the tomb he himself had prepared. His devotees died about that tomb in a crimson holocaust, but the barbarians could not burst the door, nor even mar the structure by maul or fire. So they rode away, leaving the great city in ruins, and in his ivory-domed sepulcher great Thugra Khotan slept unmolested, while the lizards of desolation gnawed at the crumbling pillars, and the very river that watered his land in old times sank into the sands and ran dry.

Many a thief sought to gain the treasure which fables said lay heaped about the moldering bones inside the dome. And many a thief died at the door of the tomb, and many another was harried by monstrous dreams to die at last with the froth of madness on his lips.

So Shevatas shuddered as he faced the tomb, nor was his shudder altogether occasioned by the legend of the serpent said to guard the sorcerer's bones. Over all myths of Thugra Khotan hung horror and death like a pall. From where the thief stood he could see the ruins of the great hall wherein chained captives had knelt by the hundreds during festivals to have their heads hacked off by the priest-king in honor of Set, the Serpent-god of Stygia. Somewhere near by had been the pit, dark and awful, wherein screaming victims were fed to a nameless amorphic monstrosity which came up out of a deeper, more hellish cavern. Legend made Thugra Khotan more than human; his worship yet lingered in a mongrel degraded cult, whose votaries stamped his likeness on coins to pay the way of their dead over the great river of darkness of which the Styx was but the material shadow. Shevatas had seen this likeness, on coins stolen from under the tongues of the dead, and its image was etched indelibly in his brain.

But he put aside his fears and mounted to the bronze door, whose smooth surface offered no bolt or catch. Not for naught had he gained access into darksome cults, had harkened to the grisly whispers of the votaries of Skelos under midnight trees, and read the forbidden iron-bound books of Vathelos the Blind.

KNEELING before the portal, he searched the sill with nimble fingers; their sensitive tips found projections too small for the eye to detect, or for less-skilled fingers to discover. These he pressed carefully and according to a peculiar system, muttering a long-forgotten incantation as he did so. As he pressed the last projection, he sprang up with frantic haste and struck the exact center of the door a quick sharp blow with his open hand.

There was no rasp of spring or hinge, but the door retreated inward, and the breath hissed explosively from Shevatas' clenched teeth. A short narrow corridor

was disclosed. Down this the door had slid, and was now in place at the other end. The floor, ceiling and sides of the tunnel-like aperture were of ivory, and now from an opening on one side came a silent writhing horror that reared up and glared on the intruder with awful luminous eyes; a serpent twenty feet long, with shimmering, iridescent scales.

The thief did not waste time in conjecturing what night-black pits lying below the dome had given sustenance to the monster. Gingerly he drew the sword, and from it dripped a greenish liquid exactly like that which slavered from the simitar-fangs of the reptile. The blade was steeped in the poison of the snake's own kind, and the obtaining of that venom from the fiend-haunted swamps of Zingara would have made a saga in itself.

Shevatas advanced warily on the balls of his feet, knees bent slightly, ready to spring either way like a flash of light. And he needed all his co-ordinate speed when the snake arched its neck and struck, shooting out its full length like a stroke of lightning. For all his quickness of nerve and eye, Shevatas had died then but for chance. His well-laid plans of leaping aside and striking down on the outstretched neck were put at naught by the blinding speed of the reptile's attack. The thief had but time to extend the sword in front of him, involuntarily closing his eyes and crying out. Then the sword was wrenched from his hand and the corridor was filled with a horrible thrashing and lashing.

Opening his eyes, amazed to find himself still alive, Shevatas saw the monster heaving and twisting its slimy form in fantastic contortions, the sword transfixing its giant jaws. Sheer chance had hurled it full against the point he had held out blindly. A few moments later the serpent sank into shining, scarcely quivering coils, as the poison on the blade struck home.

Gingerly stepping over it, the thief thrust against the door, which this time slid aside, revealing the interior of the dome. Shevatas cried out; instead of utter darkness he had come into a crimson light that throbbed and pulsed almost beyond the endurance of mortal eyes. It came from a gigantic red jewel high up in the vaulted arch of the dome. Shevatas gaped, inured though he was to the sight of riches. The treasure was there, heaped in staggering profusion—piles of diamonds, sapphires, rubies, turquoises, opals, emeralds; zikkurats of jade, jet and lapis-lazuli; pyramids of gold wedges; teocallis of silver ingots; jewel-hilted swords in cloth-of-gold sheaths; golden helmets with colored horsehair crests, or black and scarlet plumes; silver-scaled corselets; gem-crusted harness worn by warrior-kings three thousand years in their tombs; goblets carven of single jewels; skulls plated with gold, with moonstones for eyes; necklaces of human teeth set with jewels. The ivory floor was covered inches deep with gold dust that sparkled and shimmered under the crimson glow with a million scintillant lights. The thief stood in a wonderland of magic and splendor, treading stars under his sandalled feet.

But his eyes were focussed on the dais of crystal which rose in the midst of the shimmering array, directly under the red jewel, and on which should be lying the moldering bones, turning to dust with the crawling of the centuries. And as Shevatas looked, the blood drained from his dark features; his marrow turned to ice, and the skin of his back crawled and wrinkled with horror, while his lips worked soundlessly. But suddenly he found his voice in one awful scream that rang hideously under the arching dome.

Then again the silence of the ages lay among the ruins of mysterious Kuthchemes.

2

RUMORS drifted up through the meadowlands, into the cities of the Hyborians. The word ran along the caravans, the long camel-trains plodding through the sands, herded by lean hawk-eyed men in white kaftans. It was passed on by the hook-nosed herdsmen of the grasslands, from the dwellers in tents to the dwellers in the squat stone cities where kings with curled blue-black beards worshipped round-bellied gods with curious rites. The word passed up through the fringe of hills where gaunt tribesmen took toll of the caravans. The rumors came into the fertile uplands where stately cities rose above blue lakes and rivers: the rumors marched along the broad white roads thronged with ox-wains, with lowing herds, with rich merchants, knights in steel, archers and priests.

They were rumors from the desert that lies east of Stygia, far south of the Kothian hills. A new prophet had risen among the nomads. Men spoke of tribal war, of a gathering of vultures in the southeast, and a terrible leader who led his swiftly increasing hordes to victory. The Stygians, ever a menace to the northern nations, were apparently not connected with this movement; for they were massing armies on their eastern borders and their priests were making magic to fight that of the desert sorcerer, whom men called Natohk, the Veiled One; for his features were always masked.

But the tide swept northwestward, and the blue-bearded kings died before the altars of their pot-bellied gods, and their squat-walled cities were drenched in blood. Men said that the uplands of the Hyborians were the goal of Natohk and his chanting votaries.

Raids from the desert were not uncommon, but this latest movement seemed to promise more than a raid. Rumor said Natohk had welded thirty nomadic tribes and fifteen cities into his following, and that a rebellious Stygian prince had joined him. This latter lent the affair an aspect of real war.

Characteristically most of the Hyborian nations were prone to ignore the growing menace. But in Khoraja, carved out of Shemite lands by the swords of Kothic adventurers, heed was given. Lying southeast of Koth, it would bear the brunt of the invasion. And its young king was captive to the treacherous king of Ophir, who hesitated between restoring him for a huge ransom, or handing him over to his enemy, the penurious king of Koth, who offered no gold, but an advantageous treaty. Meanwhile, the rule of the struggling kingdom was in the white hands of young princess Yasmela, the king's sister.

Minstrels sang her beauty throughout the western world, and the pride of a kingly dynasty was hers. But on that night her pride was dropped from her like a cloak. In her chamber whose ceiling was a lapis lazuli dome, whose marble floor was littered with rare furs, and whose walls were lavish with golden frieze-work, ten girls, daughters of nobles, their slender limbs weighted with gem-crusted armlets and anklets, slumbered on velvet couches about the royal bed with its golden dais and silken canopy. But princess Yasmela lolled not on that silken bed. She lay naked on her supple belly upon the bare marble like the most abased suppliant, her dark hair streaming over her white shoulders, her slender fingers intertwined. She lay and writhed in pure horror that froze the blood in her lithe limbs and dilated her beautiful eyes, that

pricked the roots of her dark hair and made goose-flesh rise along her supple spine.

Above her, in the darkest corner of the marble chamber, lurked a vast shapeless shadow. It was no living thing of form or flesh and blood. It was a clot of darkness, a blur in the sight, a monstrous night-born incubus that might have been deemed a figment of a sleep-drugged brain, but for the points of blazing yellow fire that glimmered like two eyes from the blackness.

Moreover a voice issued from it—a low subtle inhuman sibilance that was more like the soft abominable hissing of a serpent than anything else, and that apparently could not emanate from anything with human lips. Its sound as well as its import filled Yasmela with a shuddering horror so intolerable that she writhed and twisted her slender body as if beneath a lash, as though to rid her mind of its insinuating vileness by physical contortion.

"You are marked for mine, princess," came the gloating whisper. "Before I wakened from the long sleep I had marked you, and yearned for you, but I was held fast by the ancient spell by which I escaped mine enemies. I am the soul of Natohk, the Veiled One! Look well upon me, princess! Soon you shall behold me in my bodily guise, and shall love me!"

The ghostly hissing dwindled off in lustful titterings, and Yasmela moaned and beat the marble tiles with her small fists in her ecstasy of terror.

"I sleep in the palace chamber of Akbatana," the sibilances continued. "There my body lies in its frame of bones and flesh. But it is but an empty shell from which the spirit has flown for a brief space. Could you gaze from that palace casement you would realize the futility of resistance. The desert is a rose-garden beneath the moon, where blossom the fires of a hundred thousand warriors. As an avalanche sweeps onward, gathering bulk and momentum, I will sweep into the lands of mine ancient enemies. Their kings shall furnish me skulls for goblets, their women and children shall be slaves of my slaves' slaves. I have grown strong in the long years of dreaming. . . .

"But thou shalt be my queen, oh princess! I will teach thee the ancient forgotten ways of pleasure. We——" Before the stream of cosmic obscenity which poured from the shadowy colossus, Yasmela cringed and writhed as if from a whip that flayed her dainty bare flesh.

"Remember!" whispered the horror. "The days will not be many before I come to claim mine own!"

Yasmela, pressing her face against the tiles and stopping her pink ears with her dainty fingers, yet seemed to hear a strange sweeping noise, like the beat of bat-wings. Then, looking fearfully up, she saw only the moon that shone through the window with a beam that rested like a silver sword across the spot where the phantom had lurked. Trembling in every limb, she rose and staggered to a satin couch, where she threw herself down, weeping hysterically. The girls slept on, but one, who roused, yawned, stretched her slender figure and blinked about. Instantly she was on her knees beside the couch, her arms about Yasmela's supple waist.

"Was it—was it——?" her dark eyes were wide with fright. Yasmela caught her in a convulsive grasp.

"Oh, Vateesa, *It* came again! I saw It—heard It speak! It spoke Its name—Natohk! It is Natohk! It is not a nightmare—it towered over me while the girls slept like drugged ones. What—oh, *what* shall I do?"

Vateesa twisted a golden bracelet about her rounded arm, in meditation.

"Oh, princess," she said, "it is evident that no mortal power can deal with It, and the charm is useless that the priests of Ishtar gave you. Therefore seek you the forgotten oracle of Mitra."

IN SPITE of her recent fright, Yasmela shuddered. The gods of yesterday become the devils of tomorrow. The Kothians had long since abandoned the worship of Mitra, forgetting the attributes of the universal Hyborian god. Yasmela had a vague idea that, being very ancient, it followed that the deity was very terrible. Ishtar was much to be feared, and all the gods of Koth. Kothian culture and religion had suffered from a subtle admixture of Shemite and Stygian strains. The simple ways of the Hyborians had become modified to a large extent by the sensual, luxurious, yet despotic habits of the East.

"Will Mitra aid me?" Yasmela caught Vateesa's wrist in her eagerness. "We have worshipped Ishtar so long——"

"To be sure he will!" Vateesa was the daughter of an Ophirean priest who had brought his customs with him when he fled from political enemies to Khoraja. "Seek the shrine! I will go with you."

"I will!" Yasmela rose, but objected when Vateesa prepared to dress her. "It is not fitting that I come before the shrine clad in silk. I will go naked, on my knees, as befits a suppliant, lest Mitra deem I lack humility."

"Nonsense!" Vateesa had scant respect for the ways of what she deemed a false cult. "Mitra would have folks stand upright before him—not crawling on their bellies like worms, or spilling blood of animals all over his altars."

Thus objurgated, Yasmela allowed the girl to garb her in the light sleeveless silk shift, over which was slipped a silken tunic, bound at the waist by a wide velvet girdle. Satin slippers were put upon her slender feet, and a few deft touches of Vateesa's pink fingers arranged her dark wavy tresses. Then the princess followed the girl, who drew aside a heavy gilt-worked tapestry and threw the golden bolt of the door it concealed. This let into a narrow winding corridor, and down this the two girls went swiftly, through another door and into a broad hallway. Here stood a guardsman in crested gilt helmet, silvered cuirass and gold-chased greaves, with a long-shafted battle-ax in his hands.

A motion from Yasmela checked his exclamation, and saluting, he took his stand again beside the doorway, motionless as a brazen image. The girls traversed the hallway, which seemed immense and eery in the light of the cressets along the lofty walls, and went down a stairway where Yasmela shivered at the blots of shadows which hung in the angles of the walls. Three levels down they halted at last in a narrow corridor whose arched ceiling was crusted with jewels, whose floor was set with blocks of crystal, and whose walls were decorated with golden frieze-work. Down this shining way they stole, holding each other's hands, to a wide portal of gilt.

Vateesa thrust open the door, revealing a shrine long forgotten except by a faithful few, and royal visitors to Khoraja's court, mainly for whose benefit the fane was maintained. Yasmela had never entered it before, though she was born in the palace. Plain and unadorned in comparison to the lavish display of Ishtar's shrines, there was about it a simplicity of dignity and beauty characteristic of the Mitran religion.

The ceiling was lofty, but it was not domed, and was of plain white marble, as

were the walls and floor, the former with a narrow gold frieze running about them. Behind an altar of clear green jade, unstained with sacrifice, stood the pedestal whereon sat the material manifestation of the deity. Yasmela looked in awe at the sweep of the magnificent shoulders, the clear-cut features—the wide straight eyes, the patriarchal beard, the thick curls of the hair, confined by a simple band about the temples. This, though she did not know it, was art in its highest form—the free, uncramped artistic expression of a highly esthetic race, unhampered by conventional symbolism.

She fell on her knees and thence prostrate, regardless of Vateesa's admonition, and Vateesa, to be on the safe side, followed her example; for after all, she was only a girl, and it was very awesome in Mitra's shrine. But even so she could not refrain from whispering in Yasmela's ear.

"This is but the emblem of the god. None pretends to know what Mitra looks like. This but represents him in idealized human form, as near perfection as the human mind can conceive. He does not inhabit this cold stone, as your priests tell you Ishtar does. He is everywhere—above us, and about us, and he dreams betimes in the high places among the stars. But here his being focusses. Therefore call upon him."

"What shall I say?" whispered Yasmela in stammering terror.

"Before you can speak, Mitra knows the contents of your mind——" began Vateesa. Then both girls started violently as a voice began in the air above them. The deep, calm, bell-like tones emanated no more from the image than from anywhere else in the chamber. Again Yasmela trembled before a bodiless voice speaking to her, but this time it was not from horror or repulsion.

"Speak not, my daughter, for I know your need," came the intonations like deep musical waves beating rhythmically along a golden beach. "In one manner may you save your kingdom, and saving it, save all the world from the fangs of the serpent which has crawled up out of the darkness of the ages. Go forth upon the streets alone, and place your kingdom in the hands of the first man you meet there."

The unechoing tones ceased, and the girls stared at each other. Then, rising, they stole forth, nor did they speak until they stood once more in Yasmela's chamber. The princess stared out of the gold-barred windows. The moon had set. It was long past midnight. Sounds of revelry had died away in the gardens and on the roofs of the city. Khoraja slumbered beneath the stars, which seemed to be reflected in the cressets that twinkled among the gardens and along the streets and on the flat roofs of houses where folk slept.

"What will you do?" whispered Vateesa, all a-tremble.

"Give me my cloak," answered Yasmela, setting her teeth.

"But alone, in the streets, at this hour!" expostulated Vateesa.

"Mitra has spoken," replied the princess. "It might have been the voice of the god, or a trick of a priest. No matter. I will go!"

Wrapping a voluminous silken cloak about her lithe figure and donning a velvet cap from which depended a filmy veil, she passed hurriedly through the corridors and approached a bronze door where a dozen spearmen gaped at her as she passed through. This was in a wing of the palace which let directly onto the street; on all other sides it was surrounded by broad gardens, bordered by a high wall.

She emerged into the street, lighted by cressets placed at regular intervals.

She hesitated; then, before her resolution could falter, she closed the door behind her. A slight shudder shook her as she glanced up and down the street, which lay silent and bare. This daughter of aristocrats had never before ventured unattended outside her ancestral palace. Then, steeling herself, she went swiftly up the street. Her satin-slippered feet fell lightly on the pave, but their soft sound brought her heart into her throat. She imagined their fall echoing thunderously through the cavernous city, rousing ragged rat-eyed figures in hidden lairs among the sewers. Every shadow seemed to hide a lurking assassin, every blank doorway to mask the slinking hounds of darkness.

Then she started violently. Ahead of her a figure appeared on the eery street. She drew quickly into a clump of shadows, which now seemed like a haven of refuge, her pulse pounding. The approaching figure went not furtively, like a thief, or timidly, like a fearful traveller. He strode down the nighted street as one who has no need or desire to walk softly. An unconscious swagger was in his stride, and his footfalls resounded on the pave. As he passed near a cresset she saw him plainly—a tall man, in the chain-mail hauberk of a mercenary. She braced herself, then darted from the shadow, holding her cloak close about her.

"Sa-ha!" his sword flashed half out of his sheath. It halted when he saw it was only a woman that stood before him, but his quick glance went over her head, seeking the shadows for possible confederates.

He stood facing her, his hand on the long hilt that jutted forward from beneath the scarlet cloak which flowed carelessly from his mailed shoulders. The torchlight glinted dully on the polished blue steel of his greaves and basinet. A more baleful fire glittered bluely in his eyes. At first glance she saw he was no Kothian; when he spoke she knew he was no Hyborian. He was clad like a captain of the mercenaries, and in that desperate command there were men of many lands, barbarians as well as civilized foreigners. There was a wolfishness about this warrior that marked the barbarian. The eyes of no civilized man, however wild or criminal, ever blazed with such a fire. Wine scented his breath, but he neither staggered nor stammered.

"Have they shut you into the street?" he asked in barbarous Kothic, reaching for her. His fingers closed lightly about her rounded wrist, but she felt that he could splinter its bones without effort. "I've but come from the last wine-shop open—Ishtar's curse on these white livered reformers who close the grog-houses! 'Let men sleep rather than guzzle,' they say—aye, so they can work and fight better for their masters! Soft-gutted eunuchs, I call them. When I served with the mercenaries of Corinthia we swilled and wenched all night and fought all day—aye, blood ran down the channels of our swords. But what of you, my girl? Take off that cursed mask——"

She avoided his clutch with a lithe twist of her body, trying not to appear to repulse him. She realized her danger, alone with a drunken barbarian. If she revealed her identity, he might laugh at her, or take himself off. She was not sure he would not cut her throat. Barbaric men did strange inexplicable things. She fought a rising fear.

"Not here," she laughed. "Come with me——"

"Where?" His wild blood was up, but he was wary as a wolf. "Are you taking me to some den of robbers?"

"No, no, I swear it!" She was hard put

to avoid the hand which was again fumbling at her veil.

"Devil bite you, hussy!" he growled disgustedly. "You're as bad as a Hyrcanian woman, with your damnable veil. Here—let me look at your figure, anyway!"

Before she could prevent it, he wrenched the cloak from her, and she heard his breath hiss between his teeth. He stood holding the cloak, eyeing her as if the sight of her rich garments had somewhat sobered him. She saw suspicion flicker sullenly in his eyes.

"Who the devil are you?" he muttered. "You're no street-waif — unless your leman robbed the king's seraglio for your clothes."

"Never mind." She dared to lay her white hand on his massive iron-clad arm. "Come with me off the street."

HE HESITATED, then shrugged his mighty shoulders. She saw that he half believed her to be some noble lady, who, weary of polite lovers, was taking this means of amusing herself. He allowed her to don the cloak again, and followed her. From the corner of her eye she watched him as they went down the street together. His mail could not conceal his hard lines of tigerish strength. Everything about him was tigerish, elemental, untamed. He was alien as the jungle to her in his difference from the debonair courtiers to whom she was accustomed. She feared him, told herself she loathed his raw brute strength and unashamed barbarism; yet something breathless and perilous inside her leaned toward him; the hidden primitive chord that lurks in every woman's soul was sounded and responded. She had felt his hardened hand on her arm, and something deep in her tingled to the memory of that contact. Many men had knelt before Yasmela. Here was one she felt had never knelt before any one. Her sensations were those of one leading an unchained tiger; she was frightened, and fascinated by her fright.

She halted at the palace door and thrust lightly against it. Furtively watching her companion, she saw no suspicion in his eyes.

"Palace, eh?" he rumbled. "So you're a maid-in-waiting?"

She found herself wondering, with a strange jealousy, if any of her maids had ever led this war-eagle into her palace. The guards made no sign as she led him between them, but he eyed them as a fierce dog might eye a strange pack. She led him through a curtained doorway into an inner chamber, where he stood, naively scanning the tapestries, until he saw a crystal jar of wine on an ebony table. This he took up with a gratified sigh, tilting it toward his lips. Vateesa ran from an inner room, crying breathlessly, "Oh, my princess——"

"Princess!"

The wine-jar crashed to the floor. With a motion too quick for sight to follow, the mercenary snatched off Yasmela's veil, glaring. He recoiled with a curse, his sword leaping into his hand with a broad shimmer of blue steel. His eyes blazed like a trapped tiger's. The air was supercharged with tension that was like the pause before the bursting of a storm. Vateesa sank to the floor, speechless with terror, but Yasmela faced the infuriated barbarian without flinching. She realized her very life hung in the balance: maddened with suspicion and unreasoning panic, he was ready to deal death at the slightest provocation. But she experienced a certain breathless exhilaration in the crisis.

"Do not be afraid," she said. "I am

Yasmela, but there is no reason to fear me."

"Why did you lead me here?" he snarled, his blazing eyes darting all about the chamber. "What manner of trap is this?"

"There is no trickery," she answered. "I brought you here because you can aid me. I called on the gods—on Mitra—and he bade me go into the streets and ask aid of the first man I met."

This was something he could understand. The barbarians had their oracles. He lowered his sword, though he did not sheathe it.

"Well, if you're Yasmela, you need aid," he grunted. "Your kingdom's in a devil of a mess. But how can I aid you? If you want a throat cut, of course——"

"Sit down," she requested. "Vateesa, bring him wine."

He complied, taking care, she noticed, to sit with his back against a solid wall, where he could watch the whole chamber. He laid his naked sword across his mail-sheathed knees. She glanced at it in fascination. Its dull blue glimmer seemed to reflect tales of bloodshed and rapine; she doubted her ability to lift it, yet she knew that the mercenary could wield it with one hand as lightly as she could wield a riding-whip. She noted the breadth and power of his hands; they were not the stubby undeveloped paws of a troglodyte. With a guilty start she found herself imagining those strong fingers locked in her dark hair.

He seemed reassured when she deposited herself on a satin divan opposite him. He lifted off his basinet and laid it on the table, and drew back his coif, letting the mail folds fall upon his massive shoulders. She saw more fully now his unlikeness to the Hyborian races. In his dark, scarred face there was a suggestion of moodiness; and without being marked by depravity, or definitely evil, there was more than a suggestion of the sinister about his features, set off by his smoldering blue eyes. A low broad forehead was topped by a square-cut tousled mane as black as a raven's wing.

"Who are you?" she asked abruptly.

"Conan, a captain of the mercenary spearmen," he answered, emptying the wine-cup at a gulp and holding it out for more. "I was born in Cimmeria."

The name meant little to her. She only knew vaguely that it was a wild grim hill-country which lay far to the north, beyond the last outposts of the Hyborian nations, and was peopled by a fierce moody race. She had never before seen one of them.

RESTING her chin on her hands, she gazed at him with the deep dark eyes that had enslaved many a heart.

"Conan of Cimmeria," she said, "you said I needed aid. Why?"

"Well," he answered, "any man can see that. Here is the king your brother in an Ophirean prison; here is Koth plotting to enslave you; here is this sorcerer screaming hell-fire and destruction down in Shem—and what's worse, here are your soldiers deserting every day."

She did not at once reply; it was a new experience for a man to speak so forthrightly to her, his words not couched in courtier phrases.

"Why are my soldiers deserting, Conan?" she asked.

"Some are being hired away by Koth," he replied, pulling at the wine-jar with relish. "Many think Khoraja is doomed as an independent state. Many are frightened by tales of this dog Natohk."

"Will the mercenaries stand?" she asked anxiously.

"As long as you pay us well," he answered frankly. "Your politics are

nothing to us. You can trust Amalric, our general, but the rest of us are only common men who love loot. If you pay the ransom Ophir asks, men say you'll be unable to pay us. In that case we might go over to the king of Koth, though that cursed miser is no friend of mine. Or we might loot this city. In a civil war the plunder is always plentiful."

"Why would you not go over to Natohk?" she inquired.

"What could he pay us?" he snorted. "With fat-bellied brass idols he looted from the Shemite cities? As long as you're fighting Natohk, you may trust us."

"Would your comrades follow you?" she asked abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she answered deliberately, "that I am going to make you commander of the armies of Khoraja!"

He stopped short, the goblet at his lips, which curved in a broad grin. His eyes blazed with a new light.

"Commander? Crom! But what will your perfumed nobles say?"

"They will obey me!" She clapped her hands to summon a slave, who entered, bowing deeply. "Have Count Thespides come to me at once, and the chancellor Taurus, lord Amalric, and the Agha Shupras.

"I place my trust in Mitra," she said, bending her gaze on Conan, who was now devouring the food placed before him by the trembling Vateesa. "You have seen much war?"

"I was born in the midst of a battle," he answered, tearing a chunk of meat from a huge joint with his strong teeth. "The first sound my ears heard was the clang of swords and the yells of the slaying. I have fought in blood-feuds, tribal wars, and imperial campaigns."

"But can you lead men and arrange battle-lines?"

"Well, I can try," he returned imperturbably. "It's no more than sword-play on a larger scale. You draw his guard, then—stab, slash! And either his head is off, or yours."

The slave entered again, announcing the arrival of the men sent for, and Yasmela went into the outer chamber, drawing the velvet curtains behind her. The nobles bent the knee, in evident surprize at her summons at such an hour.

"I have summoned you to tell you of my decision," said Yasmela. "The kingdom is in peril——"

"Right enough, my princess." It was Count Thespides who spoke—a tall man, whose black locks were curled and scented. With one white hand he smoothed his pointed mustache, and with the other he held a velvet chaperon with a scarlet feather fastened by a golden clasp. His pointed shoes were satin, his cote-hardie of gold-broidered velvet. His manner was slightly affected, but the thews under his silks were steely. "It were well to offer Ophir more gold for your royal brother's release."

"I strongly disagree," broke in Taurus the chancellor, an elderly man in an ermine-fringed robe, whose features were lined with the cares of his long service. "We have already offered what will beggar the kingdom to pay. To offer more would further excite Ophir's cupidity. My princess, I say as I have said before: Ophir will not move until we have met this invading horde. If we lose, he will give king Khossus to Koth; if we win, he will doubtless restore his majesty to us on payment of the ransom."

"And in the meantime," broke in Amalric, "the soldiers desert daily, and the mercenaries are restless to know why we dally." He was a Nemedian, a large man with a lion-like yellow mane. "We must move swiftly, if at all——"

"Tomorrow we march southward," she answered. "And there is the man who shall lead you!"

Jerking aside the velvet curtains she dramatically indicated the Cimmerian. It was perhaps not an entirely happy moment for the disclosure. Conan was sprawled in his chair, his feet propped on the ebony table, busily engaged in gnawing a beef-bone which he gripped firmly in both hands. He glanced casually at the astounded nobles, grinned faintly at Amalric, and went on munching with undisguised relish.

"Mitra protect us!" exploded Amalric. "That's Conan the northron, the most turbulent of all my rogues! I'd have hanged him long ago, were he not the best swordsman that ever donned hauberk——"

"Your highness is pleased to jest!" cried Thespides, his aristocratic features darkening. "This man is a savage—a fellow of no culture or breeding! It is an insult to ask gentlemen to serve under him! I——"

"Count Thespides," said Yasmela, "you have my glove under your baldric. Please give it to me, and then go."

"Go?" he cried, starting. "Go where?"

"To Koth or to Hades!" she answered. "If you will not serve me as I wish, you shall not serve me at all."

"You wrong me, princess," he answered, bowing low, deeply hurt. "I would not forsake you. For your sake I will even put my sword at the disposal of this savage."

"And you, my lord Amalric?"

Amalric swore beneath his breath, then grinned. True soldier of fortune, no shift of fortune, however outrageous, surprized him much.

"I'll serve under him. A short life and a merry one, say I—and with Conan the Throat-slitter in command, life is likely to be both merry and short. Mitra! If the dog ever commanded more than a company of cutthroats before, I'll eat him, harness and all!"

"And you, my Agha?" She turned to Shupras.

He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. He was typical of the race evolved along Koth's southern borders—tall and gaunt, with features leaner and more hawk-like than his purer-blooded desert kin.

"Ishtar gives, princess." The fatalism of his ancestors spoke for him.

"Wait here," she commanded, and while Thespides fumed and gnawed his velvet cap, Taurus muttered wearily under his breath, and Amalric strode back and forth, tugging at his yellow beard and grinning like a hungry lion, Yasmela disappeared again through the curtains and clapped her hands for her slaves.

At her command they brought harness to replace Conan's chain-mail—gorget, sollerets, cuirass, pauldrons, jambes, cuisses, and sallet. When Yasmela again drew the curtains, a Conan in burnished steel stood before his audience. Clad in the plate-armor, vizor lifted and dark face shadowed by the black plumes that nodded above his helmet, there was a grim impressiveness about him that even Thespides grudgingly noted. A jest died suddenly on Amalric's lips.

"By Mitra," said he slowly, "I never expected to see you cased in coat-armor, but you do not put it to shame. By my finger-bones, Conan, I have seen kings who wore their harness less regally than you!"

Conan was silent. A vague shadow crossed his mind like a prophecy. In years to come he was to remember Amalric's words, when the dream became the reality.

3

IN THE early haze of dawn the streets of Khoraja were thronged by crowds of people who watched the hosts riding from the southern gate. The army was on the move at last. There were the knights, gleaming in richly wrought plate-armor, colored plumes waving above their burnished sallets. Their steeds, caparisoned with silk, lacquered leather and gold buckles, caracoled and curvetted as their riders put them through their paces. The early light struck glints from lance-points that rose like a forest above the array, their pennons flowing in the breeze. Each knight wore a lady's token, a glove, scarf or rose, bound to his helmet or fastened to his sword-belt. They were the chivalry of Khoraja, five hundred strong, led by Count Thespides, who, men said, aspired to the hand of Yasmela herself.

They were followed by the light cavalry on rangy steeds. The riders were typical hillmen, lean and hawk-faced; peaked steel caps were on their heads and chain-mail glinted under their flowing kaftans. Their main weapon was the terrible Shemitish bow, which could send a shaft five hundred paces. There were five thousand of these, and Shupras rode at their head, his lean face moody beneath his spired helmet.

Close on their heels marched the Khoraja spearmen, always comparatively few in any Hyborian state, where men thought cavalry the only honorable branch of service. These, like the knights, were of ancient Kothic blood—sons of ruined families, broken men, penniless youths, who could not afford horses and plate-armor; five hundred of them.

The mercenaries brought up the rear, a thousand horsemen, two thousand spearmen. The tall horses of the cavalry seemed hard and savage as their riders; they made no curvets or gambades. There was a grimly business-like aspect to these professional killers, veterans of bloody campaigns. Clad from head to foot in chain-mail, they wore their vizorless headpieces over linked coifs. Their shields were unadorned, their long lances without guidons. At their saddle-bows hung battle-axes or steel maces, and each man wore at his hip a long broadsword. The spearmen were armed in much the same manner, though they bore pikes instead of cavalry lances.

They were men of many races and many crimes. There were tall Hyperboreans, gaunt, big-boned, of slow speech and violent natures; tawny-haired Gundermen from the hills of the northwest; swaggering Corinthian renegades; swarthy Zingarians, with bristling black mustaches and fiery tempers; Aquilonians from the distant west. But all, except the Zingarians, were Hyborians.

Behind all came a camel in rich housings, led by a knight on a great warhorse, and surrounded by a clump of picked fighters from the royal housetroops. Its rider, under the silken canopy of the seat, was a slim, silk-clad figure, at the sight of which the populace, always mindful of royalty, threw up its leather cap and cheered wildly.

Conan the Cimmerian, restless in his plate-armor, stared at the bedecked camel with no great approval, and spoke to Amalric, who rode beside him, resplendent in chain-mail threaded with gold, golden breastplate and helmet with a flowing horsehair crest.

"The princess would go with us. She's supple, but too soft for this work. Anyway, she'll have to get out of these robes."

Amalric twisted his yellow mustache to hide a grin. Evidently Conan supposed Yasmela intended to strap on a sword

and take part in the actual fighting, as the barbarian women often fought.

"The women of the Hyborians do not fight like your Cimmerian women, Conan," he said. "Yasmela rides with us to watch the battle. Anyway," he shifted in his saddle and lowered his voice, "between you and me, I have an idea that the princess dares not remain behind. She fears something——"

"An uprising? Maybe we'd better hang a few citizens before we start——"

"No. One of her maids talked—babbled about *Something* that came into the palace by night and frightened Yasmela half out of her wits. It's some of Natohk's deviltry, I doubt not. Conan, it's more than flesh and blood we fight!"

"Well," grunted the Cimmerian, "it's better to go meet an enemy than to wait for him."

He glanced at the long line of wagons and camp-followers, gathered the reins in his mailed hand, and spoke from habit the phrase of the marching mercenaries, "Hell or plunder, comrades—march!"

Behind the long train the ponderous gates of Khoraja closed. Eager heads lined the battlements. The citizens well knew they were watching life or death go forth. If the host was overthrown, the future of Khoraja would be written in blood. In the hordes swarming up from the savage south, mercy was a quality unknown.

All day the columns marched, through grassy rolling meadowlands, cut by small rivers, the terrain gradually beginning to slope upward. Ahead of them lay a range of low hills, sweeping in an unbroken rampart from east to west. They camped that night on the northern slopes of those hills, and hook-nosed, fiery-eyed men of the hill tribes came in scores to squat about the fires and repeat news that had come up out of the mysterious desert. Through their tales ran the name of Natohk like a crawling serpent. At his bidding the demons of the air brought thunder and wind and fog, the fiends of the underworld shook the earth with awful roaring. He brought fire out of the air and consumed the gates of walled cities, and burnt armored men to bits of charred bone. His warriors covered the desert with their numbers, and he had five thousand Stygian troops in war-chariots under the rebel prince Kutamun.

Conan listened unperturbed. War was his trade. Life was a continual battle, or series of battles; since his birth Death had been a constant companion. It stalked horrifically at his side; stood at his shoulder beside the gaming-tables; its bony fingers rattled the wine-cups. It loomed above him, a hooded and monstrous shadow, when he lay down to sleep. He minded its presence no more than a king minds the presence of his cup-bearer. Some day its bony grasp would close; that was all. It was enough that he lived through the present.

HOWEVER, others were less careless of fear than he. Striding back from the sentry lines, Conan halted as a slender cloaked figure stayed him with an outstretched hand.

"Princess! You should be in your tent."

"I could not sleep." Her dark eyes were haunted in the shadow. "Conan, I am afraid!"

"Are there men in the host you fear?" His hand locked on his hilt.

"No man," she shuddered. "Conan, is there anything you fear?"

He considered, tugging at his chin. "Aye," he admitted at last, "the curse of the gods."

Again she shuddered. "I am cursed. A fiend from the abysses has set his mark

upon me. Night after night he lurks in the shadows, whispering awful secrets to me. He will drag me down to be his queen in hell. I dare not sleep—he will come to me in my pavilion as he came in the palace. Conan, you are strong—keep me with you! I am afraid!"

She was no longer a princess, but only a terrified girl. Her pride had fallen from her, leaving her unashamed in her nakedness. In her frantic fear she had come to him who seemed strongest. The ruthless power that had repelled her, drew her now.

For answer he drew off his scarlet cloak and wrapped it about her, roughly, as if tenderness of any kind were impossible to him. His iron hand rested for an instant on her slender shoulder, and she shivered again, but not with fear. Like an electric shock a surge of animal vitality swept over her at his mere touch, as if some of his superabundant strength had been imparted to her.

"Lie here." He indicated a clean-swept space close to a small flickering fire. He saw no incongruity in a princess lying down on the naked ground beside a campfire, wrapped in a warrior's cloak. But she obeyed without question.

He seated himself near her on a boulder, his broadsword across his knees. With the firelight glinting from his blue steel armor, he seemed like an image of steel—dynamic power for the moment quiescent; not resting, but motionless for the instant, awaiting the signal to plunge again into terrific action. The firelight played on his features, making them seem as if carved out of substance shadowy yet hard as steel. They were immobile, but his eyes smoldered with fierce life. He was not merely a wild man; he was part of the wild, one with the untamable elements of life; in his veins ran the blood of the wolf-pack; in his brain lurked the brooding depths of the northern night; his heart throbbed with the fire of blazing forests.

So, half meditating, half dreaming, Yasmela dropped off to sleep, wrapped in a sense of delicious security. Somehow she knew that no flame-eyed shadow would bend over her in the darkness, with this grim figure from the outlands standing guard above her. Yet once again she wakened, to shudder in cosmic fear, though not because of anything she saw.

IT WAS a low mutter of voices that roused her. Opening her eyes, she saw that the fire was burning low. A feeling of dawn was in the air. She could dimly see that Conan still sat on the boulder; she glimpsed the long blue glimmer of his blade. Close beside him crouched another figure, on which the dying fire cast a faint glow. Yasmela drowsily made out a hooked beak of a nose, a glittering bead of an eye, under a white turban. The man was speaking rapidly in a Shemite dialect she found hard to understand.

"Let Bel wither my arm! I speak truth! By Derketo, Conan, I am a prince of liars, but I do not lie to an old comrade. I swear by the days when we were thieves together in the land of Zamora, before you donned hauberk!

"I saw Natohk; with the others I knelt before him when he made incantations to Set. But I did not thrust my nose in the sand as the rest did. I am a thief of Shumir, and my sight is keener than a weasel's. I squinted up and saw his veil blowing in the wind. It blew aside, and I saw—I saw—Bel aid me, Conan, I say I *saw!* My blood froze in my veins and my hair stood up. What I had seen burned my soul like a red-hot iron. I could not rest until I had made sure.

"I journeyed to the ruins of Kuthchemes. The door of the ivory dome

stood open; in the doorway lay a great serpent, transfixed by a sword. Within the dome lay the body of a man, so shrivelled and distorted I could scarce make it out at first—it was Shevatas, the Zamorian, the only thief in the world I acknowledged as my superior. The treasure was untouched; it lay in shimmering heaps about the corpse. That was all."

"There were no bones——" began Conan.

"There was nothing!" broke in the Shemite passionately. "Nothing! Only the *one* corpse!"

Silence reigned an instant, and Yasmela shrank with a crawling nameless horror.

"Whence came Natohk?" rose the Shemite's vibrant whisper. "Out of the desert on a night when the world was blind and wild with mad clouds driven in frenzied flight across the shuddering stars, and the howling of the wind was mingled with the shrieking of the spirits of the wastes. Vampires were abroad that night, witches rode naked on the wind, and werewolves howled across the wilderness. On a black camel he came, riding like the wind, and an unholy fire played about him, the cloven tracks of the camel glowed in the darkness. When Natohk dismounted before Set's shrine by the oasis of Aphaka, the beast swept into the night and vanished. And I have talked with tribesmen who swore that it suddenly spread gigantic wings and rushed upward into the clouds, leaving a trail of fire behind it. No man has seen that camel since that night, but a black brutish man-like shape shambles to Natohk's tent and gibbers to him in the blackness before dawn. I will tell you, Conan, Natohk is—look, I will show you an image of what I saw that day by Shushan when the wind blew aside his veil!"

Yasmela saw the glint of gold in the Shemite's hand, as the men bent closely over something. She heard Conan grunt; and suddenly blackness rolled over her. For the first time in her life, princess Yasmela had fainted.

4

DAWN was still a hint of whiteness in the east when the army was again on the march. Tribesmen had raced into camp, their steeds reeling from the long ride, to report the desert horde encamped at the Well of Altaku. So through the hills the soldiers pushed hastily, leaving the wagon trains to follow. Yasmela rode with them; her eyes were haunted. The nameless horror had been taking even more awful shape, since she had recognized the coin in the Shemite's hand the night before—one of those secretly molded by the degraded Zugite cult, bearing the features of a man dead three thousand years.

The way wound between ragged cliffs and gaunt crags towering over narrow valleys. Here and there villages perched, huddles of stone huts, plastered with mud. The tribesmen swarmed out to join their kin, so that before they had traversed the hills, the host had been swelled by some three thousand wild archers.

Abruptly they came out of the hills and caught their breath at the vast expanse that swept away to the south. On the southern side the hills fell away sheerly, marking a distinct geographical division between the Kothian uplands and the southern desert. The hills were the rim of the uplands, stretching in an almost unbroken wall. Here they were bare and desolate, inhabited only by the Zaheemi clan, whose duty it was to guard the caravan road. Beyond the hills the desert stretched bare, dusty, lifeless. Yet beyond its horizon lay the Well of Altaku, and the horde of Natohk.

The army looked down on the Pass of Shamla, through which flowed the wealth of the north and the south, and through which had marched the armies of Koth, Khoraja, Shem, Turan and Stygia. Here the sheer wall of the rampart was broken. Promontories ran out into the desert, forming barren valleys, all but one of which were closed on the northern extremity by rugged cliffs. This one was the Pass. It was much like a great hand extended from the hills; two fingers, parted, formed a fan-shaped valley. The fingers were represented by a broad ridge on either hand, the outer sides sheer, the inner, steep slopes. The vale pitched upward as it narrowed, to come out on a plateau, flanked by gully-torn slopes. A well was there, and a cluster of stone towers, occupied by the Zaheemis.

There Conan halted, swinging off his horse. He had discarded the plate-armor for the more familiar chain-mail. Thespides reined in and demanded, "Why do you halt?"

"We'll await them here," answered Conan.

" 'T were more knightly to ride out and meet them," snapped the count.

"They'd smother us with numbers," answered the Cimmerian. "Besides, there's no water out there. We'll camp on the plateau——"

"My knights and I camp in the valley," retorted Thespides angrily. "We are the vanguard, and *we,* at least, do not fear a ragged desert swarm."

Conan shrugged his shoulders and the angry nobleman rode away. Amalric halted in his bellowing order, to watch the glittering company riding down the slope into the valley.

"The fools! Their canteens will soon be empty, and they'll have to ride back up to the well to water their horses."

"Let them be," replied Conan. "It goes hard for them to take orders from me. Tell the dog-brothers to ease their harness and rest. We've marched hard and fast. Water the horses and let the men munch."

No need to send out scouts. The desert lay bare to the gaze, though just now this view was limited by low-lying clouds which rested in whitish masses on the southern horizon. The monotony was broken only by a jutting tangle of stone ruins, some miles out on the desert, reputedly the remnants of an ancient Stygian temple. Conan dismounted the archers and ranged them along the ridges, with the wild tribesmen. He stationed the mercenaries and the Khoraji spearmen on the plateau about the well. Farther back, in the angle where the hill road debouched on the plateau, was pitched Yasmela's pavilion.

With no enemy in sight, the warriors relaxed. Basinets were doffed, coifs thrown back on mailed shoulders, belts let out. Rude jests flew back and forth as the fighting-men gnawed beef and thrust their muzzles deep into ale-jugs. Along the slopes the hillmen made themselves at ease, nibbling dates and olives. Amalric strode up to where Conan sat bareheaded on a boulder.

"Conan, have you heard what the tribesmen say about Natohk? They say—Mitra, it's too mad even to repeat. What do you think?"

"Seeds rest in the ground for centuries without rotting, sometimes," answered Conan. "But surely Natohk is a man."

"I am not sure," grunted Amalric. "At any rate, you've arranged your lines as well as a seasoned general could have done. It's certain Natohk's devils can't fall on us unawares. Mitra, what a fog!"

"I thought it was clouds at first," answered Conan. "See how it rolls!"

What had seemed clouds was a thick

mist moving northward like a great unstable ocean, rapidly hiding the desert from view. Soon it engulfed the Stygian ruins, and still it rolled onward. The army watched in amazement. It was a thing unprecedented—unnatural and inexplicable.

"No use sending out scouts," said Amalric disgustedly. "They couldn't see anything. Its edges are near the outer flanges of the ridges. Soon the whole Pass and these hills will be masked——"

Conan, who had been watching the rolling mist with growing nervousness, bent suddenly and laid his ear to the earth. He sprang up with frantic haste, swearing.

"Horses and chariots, thousands of them! The ground vibrates to their tread! Ho, there!" his voice thundered out across the valley to electrify the lounging men. "Burganets and pikes, you dogs! Stand to your ranks!"

At that, as the warriors scrambled into their lines, hastily donning head-pieces and thrusting arms through shield-straps, the mist rolled away, as something no longer useful. It did not slowly lift and fade like a natural fog; it simply vanished, like a blown-out flame. One moment the whole desert was hidden with the rolling fleecy billows, piled mountainously, stratum above stratum; the next, the sun shone from a cloudless sky on a naked desert—no longer empty, but thronged with the living pageantry of war. A great shout shook the hills.

AT FIRST glance the amazed watchers seemed to be looking down upon a glittering sparkling sea of bronze and gold, where steel points twinkled like a myriad stars. With the lifting of the fog the invaders had halted as if frozen, in long serried lines, flaming in the sun.

First was a long line of chariots, drawn by the great fierce horses of Stygia, with plumes on their heads—snorting and rearing as each naked driver leaned back, bracing his powerful legs, his dusky arms knotted with muscles. The fighting-men in the chariots were tall figures, their hawk-like faces set off by bronze helmets crested with a crescent supporting a golden ball. Heavy bows were in their hands. No common archers, these, but nobles of the South, bred to war and the hunt, who were accustomed to bringing down lions with their arrows.

Behind these came a motley array of wild men on half-wild horses—the warriors of Kush, the first of the great black kingdoms of the grasslands south of Stygia. They were shining ebony, supple and lithe, riding stark naked and without saddle or bridle.

After these rolled a horde that seemed to encompass all the desert. Thousands on thousands of the war-like Sons of Shem: ranks of horsemen in scale-mail corselets and cylindrical helmets — the *asshuri* of Nippr, Shumir, and Eruk and their sister cities; wild white-robed hordes—the nomad clans.

Now the ranks began to mill and eddy. The chariots drew off to one side while the main host came uncertainly onward. Down in the valley the knights had mounted, and now Count Thespides galloped up the slope to where Conan stood. He did not deign to dismount but spoke abruptly from the saddle.

"The lifting of the mist has confused them! Now is the time to charge! The Kushites have no bows and they mask the whole advance. A charge of my knights will crush them back into the ranks of the Shemites, disrupting their formation. Follow me! We will win this battle with one stroke!"

Conan shook his head. "Were we fighting a natural foe, I would agree. But

this confusion is more feigned than real, as if to draw us into a charge. I fear a trap."

"Then you refuse to move?" cried Thespides, his face dark with passion.

"Be reasonable," expostulated Conan. "We have the advantage of position——"

With a furious oath Thespides wheeled and galloped back down the valley where his knights waited impatiently.

Amalric shook his head. "You should not have let him return, Conan. I—look there!"

Conan sprang up with a curse. Thespides had swept in beside his men. They could hear his impassioned voice faintly, but his gesture toward the approaching horde was significant enough. In another instant five hundred lances dipped and the steel-clad company was thundering down the valley.

A young page came running from Yasmela's pavilion, crying to Conan in a shrill, eager voice, "My lord, the princess asks why you do not follow and support Count Thespides?"

"Because I am not so great a fool as he," grunted Conan, reseating himself on the boulder and beginning to gnaw a huge beef-bone.

"You grow sober with authority," quoth Amalric. "Such madness as that was always your particuluar joy."

"Aye, when I had only my own life to consider," answered Conan. "Now—what in hell——"

The horde had halted. From the extreme wing rushed a chariot, the naked charioteer lashing the steeds like a madman; the other occupant was a tall figure whose robe floated spectrally on the wind. He held in his arms a great vessel of gold and from it poured a thin stream that sparkled in the sunlight. Across the whole front of the desert horde the chariot swept, and behind its thundering wheels was left, like the wake behind a ship, a long thin powdery line that glittered in the sands like the phosphorescent track of a serpent.

"That's Natohk!" swore Amalric. "What hellish seed is he sowing?"

The charging knights had not checked their headlong pace. Another fifty paces and they would crash into the uneven Kushite ranks, which stood motionless, spears lifted. Now the foremost knights had reached the thin line that glittered across the sands. They did not heed that crawling menace. But as the steel-shod hoofs of the horses struck it, it was as when steel strikes flint—but with more terrible result. A terrific explosion rocked the desert, which seemed to split apart along the strewn line with an awful burst of white flame.

In that instant the whole foremost line of the knights was seen enveloped in that flame, horses and steel-clad riders withering in the glare like insects in an open blaze. The next instant the rear ranks were piling up on their charred bodies. Unable to check their headlong velocity, rank after rank crashed into the ruins. With appalling suddenness the charge had turned into a shambles where armored figures died amid screaming mangled horses.

Now the illusion of confusion vanished as the horde settled into orderly lines. The wild Kushites rushed into the shambles, spearing the wounded, bursting the helmets of the knights with stones and iron hammers. It was all over so quickly that the watchers on the slopes stood dazed; and again the horde moved forward, splitting to avoid the charred waste of corpses. From the hills went up a cry: "We fight not men but devils!"

On either ridge the hillmen wavered. One rushed toward the plateau, froth dripping from his beard.

"Flee! flee!" he slobbered. "Who can fight Natohk's magic?"

With a snarl Conan bounded from his boulder and smote him with the beef-bone; he dropped, blood starting from nose and mouth. Conan drew his sword, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire.

"Back to your posts!" he yelled. "Let another take a backward step and I'll shear off his head! Fight, damn you!"

THE rout halted as quickly as it had begun. Conan's fierce personality was like a dash of ice-water in their whirling blaze of terror.

"Take your places," he directed quickly. "And stand to it! Neither man nor devil comes up Shamla Pass this day!"

Where the plateau rim broke to the valley slope the mercenaries braced their belts and gripped their spears. Behind them the lancers sat their steeds, and to one side were stationed the Khoraja spearmen as reserves. To Yasmela, standing white and speechless at the door of her tent, the host seemed a pitiful handful in comparison to the thronging desert horde.

Conan stood among the spearmen. He knew the invaders would not try to drive a chariot charge up the Pass in the teeth of the archers, but he grunted with surprize to see the riders dismounting. These wild men had no supply trains. Canteens and pouches hung at their saddle-peaks. Now they drank the last of their water and threw the canteens away.

"This is the death-grip," he muttered as the lines formed on foot. "I'd rather have had a cavalry charge; wounded horses bolt and ruin formations."

The horde had formed into a huge wedge, of which the tip was the Stygians and the body, the mailed *asshuri,* flanked by the nomads. In close formation, shields lifted, they rolled onward, while behind them a tall figure in a motionless chariot lifted wide-robed arms in grisly invocation.

As the horde entered the wide valley mouth the hillmen loosed their shafts. In spite of the protective formation, men dropped by dozens. The Stygians had discarded their bows; helmeted heads bent to the blast, dark eyes glaring over the rims of their shields, they came on in an inexorable surge, striding over their fallen comrades. But the Shemites gave back the fire, and the clouds of arrows darkened the skies. Conan gazed over the billowing waves of spears and wondered what new horror the sorcerer would invoke. Somehow he felt that Natohk, like all his kind, was more terrible in defense than in attack; to take the offensive against him invited disaster.

But surely it was magic that drove the horde on in the teeth of death. Conan caught his breath at the havoc wrought in the onsweeping ranks. The edges of the wedge seemed melting away, and already the valley was strewn with dead men. Yet the survivors came on like madmen unaware of death. By the very numbers of their bows, they began to swamp the archers on the cliffs. Clouds of shafts sped upward, driving the hillmen to cover. Panic struck at their hearts at that unwavering advance, and they plied their bows madly, eyes glaring like trapped wolves.

As the horde neared the narrower neck of the Pass, boulders thundered down, crushing men by the scores, but the charge did not waver. Conan's wolves braced themselves for the inevitable concussion. In their close formation and superior armor, they took little hurt from the arrows. It was the impact of the charge Conan feared, when the huge wedge should crash against his thin ranks. And he realized now there was no breaking of

that onslaught. He gripped the shoulder of a Zaheemi who stood near.

"Is there any way by which mounted men can get down into the blind valley beyond that western ridge?"

"Aye, a steep, perilous path, secret and eternally guarded. But——"

Conan was dragging him along to where Amalric sat his great war-horse.

"Amalric!" he snapped. "Follow this man! He'll lead you into yon outer valley. Ride down it, circle the end of the ridge, and strike the horde from the rear. Speak not, but go! I know it's madness, but we're doomed anyway; we'll do all the damage we can before we die! Haste!"

Amalric's mustache bristled in a fierce grin, and a few moments later his lancers were following the guide into a tangle of gorges leading off from the plateau. Conan ran back to the pikemen, sword in hand.

He was not too soon. On either ridge Shupras' hillmen, mad with anticipation of defeat, rained down their shafts desperately. Men died like flies in the valley and along the slopes—and with a roar and an irresistible upward surge the Stygians crashed against the mercenaries.

In a hurricane of thundering steel, the lines twisted and swayed. It was warbred noble against professional soldier. Shields crashed against shields, and between them spears drove in and blood spurted.

Conan saw the mighty form of prince Kutamun across the sea of swords, but the press held him hard, breast to breast with dark shapes that gasped and slashed. Behind the Stygians the *asshuri* were surging and yelling.

On either hand the nomads climbed the cliffs and came to hand-grips with their mountain kin. All along the crests of the ridges the combat raged in blind, gasping ferocity. Tooth and nail, frothing mad with fanaticism and ancient feuds, the tribesmen rent and slew and died. Wild hair flying, the naked Kushites ran howling into the fray.

It seemed to Conan that his sweat-blinded eyes looked down into a rising ocean of steel that seethed and eddied, filling the valley from ridge to ridge. The fight was at a bloody deadlock. The hillmen held the ridges, and the mercenaries, gripping their dripping pikes, bracing their feet in the bloody earth, held the Pass. Superior position and armor for a space balanced the advantage of overwhelming numbers. But it could not endure. Wave after wave of glaring faces and flashing spears surged up the slope, the *asshuri* filling the gaps in the Stygian ranks.

Conan looked to see Amalric's lances rounding the western ridge, but they did not come, and the pikemen began to reel back under the shocks. And Conan abandoned all hope of victory and of life. Yelling a command to his gasping captains, he broke away and raced across the plateau to the Khoraja reserves who stood trembling with eagerness. He did not glance toward Yasmela's pavilion. He had forgotten the princess; his one thought was the wild beast instinct to slay before he died.

"This day you become knights!" he laughed fiercely, pointing with his dripping sword toward the hillmen horses, herded near by. "Mount and follow me to hell!"

THE hill steeds reared wildly under the unfamiliar clash of the Kothic armor, and Conan's gusty laugh rose above the din as he led them to where the eastern ridge branched away from the plateau. Five hundred footmen—pauper patricians, younger sons, black sheep—on half-wild Shemite horses, charging an

army, down a slope where no cavalry had ever dared charge before!

Past the battle-choked mouth of the Pass they thundered, out onto the corpse-littered ridge. Down the steep slope they rushed, and a score lost their footing and rolled under the hoofs of their comrades. Below them men screamed and threw up their arms—and the thundering charge ripped through them as an avalanche cuts through a forest of saplings. On through the close-packed throngs the Khorajis hurtled, leaving a crushed-down carpet of dead.

And then, as the horde writhed and coiled upon itself, Amalric's lancers, having cut through a cordon of horsemen encountered in the outer valley, swept around the extremity of the western ridge and smote the host in a steel-tipped wedge, splitting it asunder. His attack carried all the dazing demoralization of a surprize on the rear. Thinking themselves flanked by a superior force and frenzied at the fear of being cut off from the desert, swarms of nomads broke and stampeded, working havoc in the ranks of their more stedfast comrades. These staggered and the horsemen rode through them. Up on the ridges the desert fighters wavered, and the hillmen fell on them with renewed fury, driving them down the slopes.

Stunned by surprize, the horde broke before they had time to see it was but a handful which assailed them. And once broken, not even a magician could weld such a horde again. Across the sea of heads and spears Conan's madmen saw Amalric's riders forging steadily through the rout, to the rise and fall of axes and maces, and a mad joy of victory exalted each man's heart and made his arm steel.

Bracing their feet in the wallowing sea of blood whose crimson waves lapped about their ankles, the pikemen in the Pass mouth drove forward, crushing strongly against the milling ranks before them. The Stygians held, but behind them the press of the *asshuri* melted; and over the bodies of the nobles of the south who died in their tracks to a man, the mercenaries rolled, to split and crumple the wavering mass behind.

Up on the cliffs old Shupras lay with an arrow through his heart; Amalric was down, swearing like a pirate, a spear through his mailed thigh. Of Conan's mounted infantry, scarce a hundred and fifty remained in the saddle. But the horde was shattered. Nomads and mailed spearmen broke away, fleeing to their camp where their horses were, and the hillmen swarmed down the slopes, stabbing the fugitives in the back, cutting the throats of the wounded.

In the swirling red chaos a terrible apparition suddenly appeared before Conan's rearing steed. It was prince Kutamun, naked but for a loin-clout, his harness hacked away, his crested helmet dented, his limbs splashed with blood. With a terrible shout he hurled his broken hilt full into Conan's face, and leaping, seized the stallion's bridle. The Cimmerian reeled in his saddle, half stunned, and with awful strength the dark-skinned giant forced the screaming steed upward and backward, until it lost its footing and crashed into the muck of bloody sand and writhing bodies.

Conan sprang clear as the horse fell, and with a roar Kutamun was on him. In that mad nightmare of battle, the barbarian never exactly knew how he killed his man. He only knew that a stone in the Stygian's hand crashed again and again on his basinet, filling his sight with flashing sparks, as Conan drove his dagger again and again into his foe's body, without apparent effect on the prince's terrible vitality. The world was swimming to

Conan's sight, when with a convulsive shudder the frame that strained against his stiffened and then went limp.

Reeling up, blood streaming down his face from under his dented helmet, Conan glared dizzily at the profusion of destruction which spread before him. From crest to crest the dead lay strewn, a red carpet that choked the valley. It was like a red sea, with each wave a straggling line of corpses. They choked the neck of the Pass, they littered the slopes. And down in the desert the slaughter continued, where the survivors of the horde had reached their horses and streamed out across the waste, pursued by the weary victors—and Conan stood appalled as he noted how few of these were left to pursue.

Then an awful scream rent the clamor. Up the valley a chariot came flying, making nothing of the heaped corpses. No horses drew it, but a great black creature that was like a camel. In the chariot stood Natohk, his robes flying; and gripping the reins and lashing like mad, crouched a black anthropomorphic being that might have been a monster ape.

With a rush of burning wind the chariot swept up the corpse-littered slope, straight toward the pavilion where Yasmela stood alone, deserted by her guards in the frenzy of pursuit. Conan, standing frozen, heard her frenzied scream as Natohk's long arm swept her up into the chariot. Then the grisly steed wheeled and came racing back down the valley, and no man dared speed arrow or spear lest he strike Yasmela, who writhed in Natohk's arms.

With an inhuman cry Conan caught up his fallen sword and leaped into the path of the hurtling horror. But even as his sword went up, the forefeet of the black beast smote him like a thunderbolt and sent him hurtling a score of feet away, dazed and bruised. Yasmela's cry came hauntingly to his stunned ears as the chariot roared by.

A yell that had nothing of the human in its timbre rang from his lips as Conan rebounded from the bloody earth and seized the rein of a riderless horse that raced past him, throwing himself into the saddle without bringing the charger to a halt. With mad abandon he raced after the rapidly receding chariot. He struck the levels flying, and passed like a whirlwind through the Shemite camp. Into the desert he fled, passing clumps of his own riders, and hard-spurring desert horsemen.

On flew the chariot, and on raced Conan, though his horse began to reel beneath him. Now the open desert lay all about them, bathed in the lurid desolate splendor of sunset. Before him rose up the ancient ruins, and with a shriek that froze the blood in Conan's veins, the unhuman charioteer cast Natohk and the girl from him. They rolled on the sand, and to Conan's dazed gaze, the chariot and its steed altered awfully. Great wings spread from a black horror that in no way resembled a camel, and it rushed upward into the sky, bearing in its wake a shape of blinding flame, in which a black manlike shape gibbered in ghastly triumph. So quickly it passed, that it was like the rush of a nightmare through a horror-haunted dream.

NATOHK sprang up, cast a swift look at his grim pursuer, who had not halted but came riding hard, with sword swinging low and spattering red drops; and the sorcerer caught up the fainting girl and ran with her into the ruins.

Conan leaped from his horse and plunged after them. He came into a room that glowed with unholy radiance, though outside dusk was falling swiftly. On a black jade altar lay Yasmela, her

naked body gleaming like ivory in the weird light. Her garments lay strewn on the floor, as if ripped from her in brutal haste. Natohk faced the Cimmerian—inhumanly tall and lean, clad in shimmering green silk. He tossed back his veil, and Conan looked into the features he had seen depicted on the Zugite coin.

"Aye, blench, dog!" the voice was like the hiss of a giant serpent. "I am Thugra Khotan! Long I lay in my tomb, awaiting the day of awakening and release. The arts which saved me from the barbarians long ago likewise imprisoned me, but I knew one would come in time—and he came, to fulfill his destiny, and to die as no man has died in three thousand years!

"Fool, do you think you have conquered because my people are scattered? Because I have been betrayed and deserted by the demon I enslaved? I am Thugra Khotan, who shall rule the world despite your paltry gods! The desert is filled with my people; the demons of the earth shall do my bidding, as the reptiles of the earth obey me. Lust for a woman weakened my sorcery. Now the woman is mine, and feasting on her soul, I shall be unconquerable! Back, fool! You have not conquered Thugra Khotan!"

He cast his staff and it fell at the feet of Conan, who recoiled with an involuntary cry. For as it fell it altered horribly; its outline melted and writhed, and a hooded cobra reared up hissing before the horrified Cimmerian. With a furious oath Conan struck, and his sword sheared the horrid shape in half. And there at his feet lay only the two pieces of a severed ebon staff. Thugra Khotan laughed awfully, and wheeling, caught up something that crawled loathsomely in the dust of the floor.

In his extended hand something alive writhed and slavered. No tricks of shadows this time. In his naked hand Thugra Khotan gripped a black scorpion, more than a foot in length, the deadliest creature of the desert, the stroke of whose spiked tail was instant death. Thugra Khotan's skull-like countenance split in a mummy-like grin. Conan hesitated; then without warning he threw his sword.

Caught off guard, Thugra Khotan had no time to avoid the cast. The point struck beneath his heart and stood out a foot behind his shoulders. He went down, crushing the poisonous monster in his grasp as he fell.

Conan strode to the altar, lifting Yasmela in his blood-stained arms. She threw her white arms convulsively about his mailed neck, sobbing hysterically, and would not let him go.

"Crom's devils, girl!" he grunted. "Loose me! Fifty thousand men have perished today, and there is work for me to do——"

"No!" she gasped, clinging with convulsive strength, as barbaric for the instant as he in her fear and passion. "I will not let you go! I am yours, by fire and steel and blood! You are mine! Back there, I belong to others—here I am mine—and yours! You shall not go!"

He hesitated, his own brain reeling with the fierce upsurging of his violent passions. The lurid unearthly glow still hovered in the shadowy chamber, lighting ghostlily the dead face of Thugra Khotan, which seemed to grin mirthlessly and cavernously at them. Out on the desert, in the hills among the oceans of dead, men were dying, were howling with wounds and thirst and madness, and kingdoms were staggering. Then all was swept away by the crimson tide that rode madly in Conan's soul, as he crushed fiercely in his iron arms the slim white body that shimmered like a witch-fire of madness before him.

Golden Blood

By JACK WILLIAMSON

A tale of weird adventures in the hidden land beyond the cruel Rub' Al Khali desert, and a golden folk that ride on a golden-yellow tiger and worship a golden snake

The Story Thus Far

DYNAMITING their schooner behind them on the south coast of Arabia, a little band of desperate adventurers struck out inland, plunging into the hostile mystery of the Rub' Al Khali, the world's cruelest and least-known desert. Their leaders were Price Durand, wealthy American soldier of fortune, Jacob Garth, enigmatic Englishman, and Joao de Castro, unsavory Macanese.

Equipped with an army tank, machine-guns, and mountain artillery, and accompanied by the sheikh Fouad el Akmet and his renegade Bedouins, they are raiding the forbidden "golden land," which is guarded by the uncanny scientific powers of its weird rulers, the "golden folk"—a man, an exotic woman, a huge, domesticated tiger, and a gigantic snake, all four of which appear amazingly to be of eternal yellow metal, and yet immortally alive.

Aysa, a strange, lovely fugitive from Malikar, the golden man, was captured and ill-used by de Castro; and Price Durand, unable to save her in any other way, left the party with her. The two reached Anz, an ancient, sand-buried city, where they discovered the tomb of Iru, an ancient king who was the enemy of the deathless "golden folk."

Malikar came riding on the golden tiger in quest of Aysa. Price fought him in the catacombs under Anz, with the golden ax of Iru, which is tempered hard as steel. The age-old ax-helve broke, and Price was defeated. Malikar carried off the girl, and left him sealed in the tomb, with the bones and the weapons of the barbarian king of whom Aysa believes him to be the reincarnation.

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11. The Tiger's Trail

AFTER a time Price gave up his frantic attempts to force the vault's locked door, and sank back exhausted on the chill stone floor of the ancient tomb.

Panic was near, the red, blind insanity of terror. His body was a-tremble, clammy with sudden sweat. He found himself beating with his hands on the polished cold stone, and the vault was full of his hoarse, useless shouts.

A quiet voice in his brain bade him sit down, and conserve his strength, and think. His situation was extreme, almost melodramatic—locked in a tomb, in the catacombs beneath Anz, beneath a sand-whelmed city centuries lost. Fear-nerved struggles would get him nowhere. He must collect his scattered senses, think.

He dared not hope for outside aid. Malikar and his acolytes, departing with the captive Aysa, had obviously left him here to die. The vault must be opened by his own efforts. And he had not long for the task; the air was already vitiated. His lungs were gasping in the musty stuff with great gulps; his head rang and roared.

This story begun in WEIRD TALES for April

"The woman's body was yellow as the snake, and had something of the serpent's sinuous grace."

Already half suffocated, he was still dazed from Malikar's final blow.

Pressing his hands to his throbbing head, Price tried to think. He must take stock of his prison. If he could find some tool . . .

Anxiously he fumbled for his matches, felt the little box. With a sigh of relief he struck a light, peered about the tiny square chamber. Among scattered human bones he saw the broken helve of the ax, then the shining golden head of it, at the door. The oval shield was near, the heavy yellow mail still upon his body.

Abruptly giddy from the splitting pain in his head, he leaned on the cold wall, and lighted a cigarette with the dying match. The smoke cleared his brain a

little; it hid the musty charnel odor of the vault. But still his head throbbed, still his mouth was bitter and dry.

When the cigarette was gone he lit another match, and examined the door, a massive slab of hewn and polished granite, cleverly hung, so that metal lock and hinges were concealed. On the outside there was a golden knob. But its smooth black inner surface was unbroken.

Forcing himself to deliberate and unhurried movement, he picked up the head of the golden ax. Wrapping his handkerchief about the blade to protect his fingers, he attacked the door with the pick-like point opposite the cutting edge.

The hidden mechanism of the lock, he reasoned, must be contained in a cavity in the stone, at the level of the golden knob. The shell of granite covering it would be relatively thin; it might be possible to break it away.

The stone was obdurate, his tool clumsy. His head drummed with pain, and the air was rapidly becoming unbreathable. Gasping for breath, he reeled as he worked, occasionally striking a match to estimate his progress.

For a time that seemed hours he toiled, when another man might have cursed and dropped his tool and flung himself down to die. The idea of defeat, of failure, was not in Price Durand's nature. He had a vast confidence that the Durand luck—though it had so recently betrayed him—would come to his rescue, if he just kept fighting.

Thought of Aysa, as much as his own safety, spurred him on. He knew that he loved the brown-haired, gayly brave fugitive. She was his, by some immutable law of life. Her captivity filled him with savage resentment.

Ringing hollow beneath the ax-point, the shell of rock cracked at last. Rapidly, then, it crumbled beneath his blows. Holding a match in one hand, he manipulated the bronze levers and tumblers of the ancient lock.

Staggering and blind with fatigue and asphyxiation, he slid back the great bolt, swung the door inward, and pitched through the opening into the cleaner air of the open catacombs.

In delirious joy he sucked in the air that had once seemed musty and stale, until he was able to light one of the torches he and Aysa had brought into the crypts. Then, taking up the ax and the oval shield, he found the stair, and climbed wearily back to the surface.

PRICE laughed weakly and uncertainly, for pure joy, when he came into the hot, white noonday light of the hidden garden. He stood a while in the sun, half blind, drinking up the blazing radiance, the warm fresh air.

Presently he stumbled to the fountain and washed his mouth and drank. Collapsing upon the grass beside the pool, he dropped into the sleep of complete exhaustion.

Upon the dawn of a clear, still day, he woke, ravenously hungry. His head was clear again, the bruise of Malikar's mace subsiding. As he found food from the slender remaining store, and ate, his mind was busy with the problem of Aysa's rescue.

It is characteristic of Price that he did not pause to wonder whether he could liberate the girl. His only problem was *how*.

It was in the soft earth where water had overflowed from the pool that he found the tiger's tracks, after he had eaten. At first he could not think what had made them, they were so amazingly huge. Though shaped like those of any cat, they were large as an elephant's.

Eagerly he followed the deep prints

along the side of the garden, out of the walled court, and off among the sand-heaped ruins of Anz. The wind had not yet moved sufficient sand to efface them.

At once he determined to follow the tiger's trail. That, surely, would be the shortest path to Aysa. He did not pause to reflect upon the dangers and difficulties that might lie before him, except in order to prepare to meet them. He did not consider his probable failure; procrastination was not in his nature, for Price was a man of action.

Delay would mean disaster. The loose red sand, flowing almost like a liquid beneath the wind, would soon obliterate the prints. But he had to make a few preparations before taking the trail.

First he searched the oasis for a stick of hardwood, carved out a new helve and fitted it to the golden ax, which was now his only weapon.

Then he saddled the two camels, which had regained much of their lost strength upon the lush vegetation of the oasis, and packed the full water-skins, and a bundle of green forage, upon Aysa's beast.

Mounting his own *bejin* and leading the other, he rode out of the hidden oasis where he had found the zenith of happiness and the nadir of despair, rode through the shattered piles of sand-leaguered Anz, and over a yellow-red dune that had conquered the black walls.

All day he followed the gigantic tracks. Straight northward they led him, across a billowing sea of crescent hills. The trail, at first, was easy enough to follow. But in the blazing afternoon a breath of wind arose, furnace-hot, and the obliterating drift-sand crept rustling before it.

By sunset the trail was hardly distinguishable. A dozen times Price lost it on the upward slope of a dune, only to pick it up again in the hollow beyond. At dusk he had to stop.

The camels were weary. They had not been completely recovered from the terrible journey to Anz. And Price, in his desperate haste, had urged them on unsparingly. He fed them the green forage, ate and drank meagerly, and rolled himself in his blanket, praying that the wind would stop.

It blew harder, instead. All night dry sands whispered with the desert's ghostly voice, mockingly, as if they taunted Price with Aysa's fate at the hands of the golden Malikar. Long before dawn the trail was swept out completely.

BEFORE sunrise Price saddled the *bejins* again, and rode on in the same direction that the trail had led him, driving the jaded animals to the limit of their endurance.

That afternoon his own mount fell down upon the hot sand and died. He gave most of the remaining water to Aysa's dromedary, and rode on, into the unknown north. From the next dune he looked back at the white shape sprawled in the sun . . . a hardy beast; it had served him well and he regretted to leave so . . . and he rode on over the crest.

Some time on the next day—the shadow of the desert's madness was already descending upon him; he never remembered whether it was morning or afternoon—he came out of the dunes, upon a vast flat plain of yellow clay.

Upon that, he reasoned with the dull effort that precedes delirium, the giant tracks would not have been obliterated by the wind. After an hour's riding back and forth, he found the enormous prints again, and followed them doggedly across the clay-pan.

The water was all gone that night. He lay down near the camel, in a dry *wadi*. His mouth was swollen and dry; he was too thirsty to sleep. But even if he could

not sleep, he dreamed. Dreamed that he was back with Aysa at the lost oasis, drinking from the stone-rimmed pools and plucking fresh fruit. The dreams verged oddly into reality. He caught himself speaking to Aysa, and woke again with a start to his desolate surroundings.

Day came, and he rode on. The fevered dreams did not stop. He was back in Anz, with the lovely Aysa. He was with her in the deep tomb of Iru, fighting Malikar. He was back in the camp on the road of skulls freeing her from the clutches of Joao de Castro.

But through all the visions of his half-delirium, a single idea reigned in his spinning brain. A fixed purpose dominated him. And he urged the flagging camel northward, along the trail of a gigantic tiger.

Again the trail become more difficult to follow. The clay was flinty, harder; the great feet had left but slight impressions. In the afternoon the hard yellow pan gave way to bare black lava, to a flat, volcanic plateau whose sharp-edged, fire-twisted rocks were hard going for the foot-sore camel, and upon which the golden tiger had left no mark.

There the tracks were hopelessly lost. Price abandoned any attempt to find traces of the huge pads, and rode straight on over the rocky terrain, into the north. Night came, and moonless darkness. And still he urged the half-dead dromedary on, toward the pole-star, glittering pale above the desert horizon.

Polaris danced and beckoned and taunted. Strange pageantries of madness appeared and dissolved upon the star-lit desert. And Price rode on. Sometimes he forgot the reason, and wondered what he would find beneath the star. But still he rode on.

12. "The Rock of Hell"

PRICE woke in the dawn, chilled and shivering beneath his blanket. The emaciated *hejin* sprawled beside him. He staggered to his feet, trying in vain to recall when he had stopped, and saw the mountain.

In the cold, motionless desert air, it looked very near, only a few miles across the barren, black volcanic plain, a mountain shaped like a truncated cone, rugged, steep-walled. On its summit was a bright coronal, a golden crest that exploded into scintillant splendor when the first sunlight touched it.

Price feared at first that it was mirage or delirium; but complete sanity had come back to him for a little while, with the chill of the dawn, and he knew the mountain was no dream. And it was too early for mirage; the mountain was too motionlessly real.

He remembered the old Arab's story of a black mountain, *Hajar Jehannum,* or "Rock of Hell", upon which golden *djinn* dwelt in a palace of yellow metal.

The parchment of Quadra y Vargas, the old Spanish soldier of fortune, came back to his mind, with its fantastic account of golden folk—"idols of gold that live and move"—dwelling upon a mountain in *la casa dorada,* and worshipped like gods by the people of the oasis below.

It had all seemed impossible. But he had seen the golden tiger, and its yellow riders, had fought with Malikar, and followed the tiger's trail for grim long days. Now here was the mountain, with its crown of gold. Impossible. But was it, like so many impossible things, true?

He goaded the staggering, grumbling *hejin* to its feet, climbed into the saddle, and rode on, toward the mountain. Aysa had been taken there, he knew, upon the golden tiger, by her yellow captor. And there he was going after her. It might

not be easy to find her and set her free, but he was going to do it. If he himself failed, there was yet the Durand luck.

All day he went on toward the mountain. Sometimes the camel reeled and staggered. Then he dismounted and stumbled along on foot, driving it for a distance, until it could rest.

The grim lava tableland seemed to stretch out as he advanced. But at sunset he could distinguish the towers and spires of the glittering castle, shimmering, splendid, drawing him with resistless fascination.

Once more he toiled on, far into the night. At dawn the black rock seemed no nearer, but merely larger. Its black walls, of columnar basalt, frowned precipitously grim. They seemed unscalable. Price, in the more lucid periods of his brain-fevered advance, wondered how the castle could be reached.

A crenelated wall of black stone skirted the top of the cliffs—a wall apparently useless, for half a mile of sheer precipice hung below it. Within rose the piles of the unattainable castle. The blazing fulgor of gold, and the brilliant white of alabaster. Twisted domes and turrets. Slim towers. Balconied minarets. Broad roofs and pointed spires. Yellow gold, and white marble.

The high castle was not all of gold. But even so, the value of the yellow metal blazing from it was incalculable, Price knew. The treasure before his eyes might rival in value the monetary gold in the vaults of all the world.

But gold meant nothing, now, to Price Durand. He was fighting back the mists of madness, battling vision and delirium, ignoring the tortures of exhaustion, of thirst that parched his whole body. He was seeking a girl. A girl with gay violet eyes, whose name was Aysa.

Again he was riding on. The bloody, implacable sun rose once more, on his right, and flooded the lava plain with cruel light. The brief sanity of the dawn deserted, and madness of thirst rode back upon stinging barbs of radiation.

It was some time later in the day that the *hejin* lifted its white, snake-like neck, and looked eastward, with more of life than it had displayed for days. Thereafter it tried continually to turn aside. But Price, with merciless *mas'hab* stick, drove it on toward the mountain.

After a time he could make out men standing upon the high black walls. Tiny dolls in blue. Little more than moving blue specks. But he thought they were jeering at him, taunting him with Aysa's captivity, with their walled security upon the cliffs. He found himself cursing them, in a voice that was a whispering croak.

Then, again, when he was nearer the mountain, men rode to meet him. Men in hooded robes of blue, upon white racing-camels. Nine of them, armed with long, yellow-bladed pikes, and golden *yataghans*.

Price drove his staggering *hejin* on toward them, whispering insane curses. He knew that they were branded with the mark of the golden snake, that they were the human slaves of the golden man, of Malikar, who had stolen Aysa.

They stopped on the bare lava before him, and awaited his coming.

With a thin arm he lifted the golden ax that was slung to the pommel of his saddle. Trying in vain to goad his dromedary to a trot, he advanced, croaking out the syllables of the ax-song of Iru.

And abruptly the nine whirled, as if in consternation, before this gaunt, golden-armored warrior upon a reeling skeleton of a camel, and fled back toward the mountain, and around it.

Price's mount was still trying to turn off toward the right, but he followed on

after the nine. They left him far behind, but at last he rounded the sheer shoulder of crystalline basalt, that leapt up in colossal hexagonal columns toward the bright castle, and came to the east side of the mountain.

THE men were again in view, sitting still upon their camels and looking apprehensively back, when Price came around the mountain. They delayed a little longer, and then retreated again. They rode directly into the mountain.

Again Price followed. At the top of a short slope he saw a square black tunnel in the cliff, the opening of a horizontal shaft driven straight into the basalt.

He started up the lava slope. The *hejin* fell weakly to its knees, and refused to get up again. Price got out of the saddle, took the golden ax and the yellow oval shield, and started on afoot.

A heavy clang of metal reached his ears, and he saw that the mouth of the tunnel had vanished. In its place was a square of bright gold, inlaid in the black mountain wall.

It was madness. He knew that he had driven himself harder than a man, by rights, can go. He knew that he could not longer trust his senses. Perhaps, after all, there had been no tunnel. The men who fled might have been figments of delirium.

But he reeled on up the slope, in the bright mail of Iru, with the ax and the buckler of the old king of Anz.

He came to the yellow square in the basaltic mountain's flank. His eyes had not deceived him; there had been a tunnel. Golden gates had closed it. He saw the seam down the middle, the massive hinges on either side. Broad panels of yellow gold, twenty feet high, smooth, polished so that he could see his reflection in them.

He paused an instant, wondering. Was this Price Durand? This thin, stern figure, with staring, sunken, glassy eyes. With black, swollen lips. With madness and death upon a wild and haggard face. Was Price Durand this gaunt specter in golden mail, carrying the arms of a king centuries dust?

The wonder at himself came and fled, like any idea of his desert-maddened brain—like any idea save the one that did not change, the single idea that he must find Aysa.

Then his croaking voice was demanding in Arabic that the golden doors be opened. He heard a subdued stirring beyond the xanthic panels, but they did not move.

He whispered the ax-song of Iru, and hammered upon the mocking golden valves with the battle-ax. And yet they did not open.

Still he beat upon the gates, and shrilled dry-voiced curses, and croaked Aysa's name. And shining silence taunted him.

Then the dominating purpose that had driven him through terrible days was broken. His reason found sanctity in madness from suffering in a land too cruel for life. And Price was left the creature of delirium.

13. The Golden Land

THROUGH several days Price drifted lazily back from temporary insanity into slow awareness. He was among Arabs. Arabs who dressed oddly, and spoke a curious archaic dialect. They were his friends, or rather, awe-struck worshippers. They called him Iru.

He recalled vaguely that somewhere he had heard this strange dialect before. He had even heard the name Iru. But it was several days before he remembered the circumstances of his hearing either.

He lay upon rugs and cushions in a long room, dark and cool, with smoothly

plastered mud walls. A guard of the strange Arabs was always near him. And a man who seemed their leader had come many times to see him.

Yarmud was his name. A typical Arab, tall, thin-lipped, hawk-nosed. Price liked him. His dark eyes were straight and piercing. He carried himself with a simple, reserved dignity. Upon his lean, brown face was fierce, stern pride, almost regal.

Yarmud plainly was the ruler of these Arabs; yet he appeared to defer to Price as if to a greater potentate.

Price slept most of the time. He made no exertion save to drink the water and camel's milk, to eat the simple fare, that his hosts offered him where he lay. He did not try to question them, or even to think. The hardships of his terrible march upon the tiger's trail had brought him near death, indeed. Tortured body and fevered mind recovered but slowly.

Then one afternoon, when Yarmud entered the room, a stately, august figure in his long, oddly fashioned black *abba*, Price awoke. His mind was suddenly sane and clear again. He rose to meet the old Arab, though his limbs felt yet weak.

Old Yarmud smiled flashingly in pleasure, to see him rise.

"*Salaam aleikŭm*, Lord Iru," he called. And, to Price's astonishment, he dropped to his knees on the floor.

Price returned the immemorial desert formula, and Yarmud rose, anxiously inquiring about his health.

"Oh, I'm coming round all right," he assured the Arab. "How long have I been here?"

"Five days ago your camel—or the camel of the maiden Aysa, who went to wake you—came to the lake. You, Iru, were fastened upon the beast, with a halter-rope around your body and the pommels of the saddle."

He knew, then, that this must be the town of El Yerim, from which Aysa had fled. These people thought him the legendary king of Anz, awakened to free them from bondage to the golden beings. No great wonder that, since he had ridden out of the desert with the weapons of the ancient ruler, looking more dead than alive.

"The mountain where Malikar lives," he asked, "is it near?"

Yarmud gestured with a lean arm. "Northwest. The journey of half a day."

Price realized then that his *hejin*, when it tried to turn aside on the last day of the ride to the mountain, had been trying to come to the oasis here. He supposed that, after abandoning his insane hammering upon the golden gate, he had retained consciousness enough to mount the dromedary and tie himself to the saddle, though he recalled nothing of it. And the loyal animal had brought him here.

"Aysa?" he asked Yarmud, eagerly. "Know you where she is?"

"No. She was chosen by Malikar to go to the mountain with the snake's tribute. She escaped, none knew how," the old Arab glanced at Price, with the suggestion of a wink, "and went in search of Anz, the lost city, to waken you. You know not where she is?"

Price's heart went out to Yarmud, with the certainty that he had connived at Aysa's escape.

"No. Malikar came, and carried her off. He left me locked in the old catacombs. I got out, and followed the tracks of his tiger. They led to the mountain."

"We shall free her," said Yarmud, "when we destroy the golden folk."

Noticing Price's weakness, the old ruler soon departed, leaving him to decide one problem that had risen. These Arabs obviously considered Price the miraculous resurrection of their ancient

king. As such, they were no doubt ready to follow him in a war against the golden beings.

Since he had the old king's arms—mail, ax and shield were beside his bed—and since he knew the ax-song, it might be easy enough for him to play the part. But Price was naturally frank, straightforward. Everything in him revolted at assuming false colors.

Next morning he was feeling stronger. And he had made his decision.

WHEN Yarmud entered again, and was about to kneel, Price stopped him.

"Wait. You call me by the name of the king of lost Anz. But I am not Iru. My name is Price Durand."

Yarmud gaped at him.

"I was born in another land," Price explained. "I came here across the sea and the mountains."

The Arab recovered, remonstrated excitedly:

"But you must be Iru! You are tall: you have the blue eyes, the flaming hair! Aysa went to seek you, found you. You yourself say that you broke from the tomb. You come from Anz with the ax of Iru, and whispering his ax-song."

Price began an explanation of his life, and the expedition into the desert, of how he had come to meet Aysa.

"Yes, those strangers are here," Yarmud agreed. "They camp across the lake. They take our food, and turn their camels on our pasture, and give us no pay. They wish my warriors to march with them against the golden folk. But none of them is, like you, the image of Iru."

In the end, Price was unable to convince Yarmud that he was not the ancient king, returned. Like Aysa, the old man cheerfully admitted his story, but insisted that he was Iru, born again. And though he was unwilling to accept any theory that he was the reincarnation of a barbarian king, Price could find no effective argument against it.

"Promise me that you will say no more that you are not Iru," at last Yarmud demanded, shrewdly, "for my warriors are eager to follow you against the golden folk."

And Price, for Aysa's sake, was glad enough to promise. After all, there might be something in Yarmud's contention. He did not intend to trouble himself further about it. The problems of one life were proving quite enough for him, without any gratuitous assumption of the burdens of another.

Aysa, Price found, was the daughter of Yarmud's brother, who had been sheikh of the Beni Anz, until Malikar had done away with him two harvest-seasons before, for refusal to send the annual tribute to the snake. Yarmud, then, his successor, was Aysa's uncle—which fact further increased Price's liking for the sternly proud old ruler.

Late that afternoon Price, for the first time, left the long room in which he had wakened.

"When Aysa escaped, Malikar demanded more tribute to the snake," Yarmud told him. "A camel laden with dates and grain, and another maiden. The snake-men have come today to take them."

Price expressed desire to watch the departure of the sacrifice.

"You may," Yarmud agreed. "But you should dress as one of my warriors. It would not be well for Malikar to know you are here, before we strike."

He arrayed Price in a long, flowing *gumbaz,* or inner garment, a brown *abba,* and a vivid green *kafiyeh,* which concealed his red hair; armed him with a long, two-edged bronze sword and a broad-bladed spear with a wooden shaft.

MINGLING with a score of men similarly dressed, Price went out into El Yerim.

He found himself upon the dusty, irregular streets of a town half concealed in groves of date-palms. The clustered mud buildings, low and squat, were of the simple, massive adobe architecture old as Babylon. The streets were deserted save for groups of Arab warriors; an air of silent dread hung over them.

Hastening northward along the brown adobe walls, they came out of the town, upon the gravel shore of a tiny lake. Its crystal water was boiling up in the center, from the uprush of the great springs that fed it—and made possible this desert garden that Quadra y Vargas had called "the golden land."

Green-tufted palms lined the opposite shore, and under them Price saw the camp of the expedition with which he had come into the desert. The trim khaki drill tents of Jacob Garth and the other whites. The black camel's hair *hejras* of the sheikh Fouad el Akmet and his Bedouins. The gray silent bulk of the army tank. Little groups of men were standing beneath the palms, watching; he recognized bulky Jacob Garth, and his enemy, Joao de Castro.

Then Price's eyes went to what the others were watching.

Two hundred yards from where Price and the Arab warriors stood, along the broad bare strip of gravel between the adobe town and the little lake, stood a dozen white camels. Blue-robed men, armed with shimmering yellow *yataghans,* sat upon five of them, holding the halter-ropes of the others. One was loaded with wicker hampers; that, he supposed, was part of the tribute.

A thin, wailing shriek of agonized grief rose among the low mud houses. And the remaining six snake-men came into view, two of them dragging between them a young girl whose hands were lashed behind her. Behind followed a haggard woman, screaming and beating her flat breasts.

The girl seemed submissive, paralyzed with fear. She made no struggle as she was lifted to one of the mounted men, who laid her inert body across the saddle before him. The other men leapt upon their camels, and wheeled them, almost running down the grief-stricken woman.

Price ran forward impulsively as the eleven started around the lake, one of them leading the laden camel. Yarmud gripped his arm, stopped him.

"Wait, Iru," he whispered. "You are not yet strong from your ride. Nor are we ready for battle. If we interfere, Malikar will come and bathe El Yerim in blood. And Vekyra—she will hunt the human game! Wait, until we are ready."

Price stopped, realizing the wisdom of the sheikh's words. But hot rage filled him, the burning resentment he always felt when he saw the weak abused by the strong. And cold determination filled him to destroy utterly the golden beings—be they human or living metal—that had subjected this race to such base slavery. Before, he might have been satisfied with the rescue of Aysa. Now he was filled with a stern and passionless resolve to obliterate the beings who had taken her from him.

14. The Menace in the Mirage

THE Price Durand who rode around the little lake, five days later, and into the *farengi* camp, with Yarmud and two-score warriors of the Beni Anz, was not the same restless wanderer who had set out with the expedition from the Arabian Sea, so many weary weeks before.

He felt completely recovered, now, from the suffering of his last cruel jour-

ney, and filled with a burning impatience to test his strength with Malikar that would brook no longer delay.

The desert sun had burned him to the brown of an Arab, had drawn every superfluous drop of moisture from his body. He was hard, lean, wiry. A new iron strength was in him, bred of the desert he had fought and mastered, a tireless endurance.

His spirit was hardened as much as his supple body. He had joined Jacob Garth, not in quest of gold, but a restless malcontent, a weary sportsman in search of a new game, a world-rover driven by vague and obscure longings, by indefinable desire for strange vistas.

In the Rub' Al Khali he had found Aysa, strange, lovely girl, fugitive from weird peril. He had fled with her across the shifting sands . . . loved her in the hidden garden of a lost city . . . lost her to a power that he did not yet understand.

Now he was determined to find and free the girl, to blot out the beings that had taken her. It was as if the desert life had crystallized all his restless energy into a single driving power that would yield to no opposition, admit no failure.

He knew that very real and immediate danger faced the attempt. The powers of the golden beings, as he had glimpsed them, were vast and ominous, appalling. But it was not in Price to consider the consequences of defeat, save as challenge to another battle.

Jacob Garth came out of his tent, to meet Price and his bodyguard. Always an enigma, the huge man was unchanged. His puffy, tallow-white face was blandly placid, mask-like, as ever; pale, cold blue eyes still peered blankly and unfeelingly from above his tangle of curly red beard.

He stopped, and surveyed Price for a time, and then his voice rang out, richly sonorous, in casual greeting, free from hint of surprize:

"Hullo, Durand."

"Good morning, Garth."

Price looked down from his *hejin*—Yarmud's gift—at the gross, bovinely calm man in faded, dusty khaki. He felt the cold eyes taking in his gleaming chain mail, his bright shield, the yellow ax.

"Where've you been, Durand?" Garth boomed suddenly.

Price met his searching, unreadable gaze. "We've a good deal to talk over, Garth. Suppose we adjourn somewhere out of the sun?"

"Will you come in my tent, over here under the palms?"

Price nodded. He dismounted and gave the halter-rope of his camel to one of Yarmud's men. With a word to the old sheikh, he followed Jacob Garth to the tent, entered before him. Garth motioned to a blanket spread on the gravel floor; they squatted on it.

The big man stared at him, silently, rather grimly, then spoke suddenly:

"You understand, Durand, that you aren't returning to your old place as leader of this expedition. I don't know just how the men will want to dispose of you, since your—desertion."

"That affair was revolt against my authority!" cried Price. "And against every law of human decency. I'm no deserter!" He caught himself. "But we needn't go into that. And your men won't be called upon to dispose of me."

"You appear to be in cahoots with the natives," Garth observed.

"They have accepted me as a leader. We are planning an attack on the mountain of the golden folk. I came to see if you would care to join the expedition."

Jacob Garth seemed more interested. "They will actually follow you?" he demanded. "Against their golden gods?"

"I think so."

"Then perhaps we can come to some agreement." The deep voice was suave as ever, colorless. "We've been here for weeks. The men are rested, ready for action. We've been drilling. And scouting over the country.

"We'd have moved on the mountain already, but the natives refused to join me. And it appeared bad strategy to advance and leave them in control of the water. We didn't trust them."

"I'm sure," Price said, "of the entire loyalty of the Beni Anz—or at least of Yarmud, the sheikh—to me. I propose that we join forces—until the golden people are smashed."

"And then?"

"You and the men can help yourselves to the golden palace. All I want is Aysa's safety."

"You mean the woman you took away from de Castro?"

Price nodded.

"Well, Joao is going to have something to say about her. I promised him his choice of any women we take. But, for my part, I accept your terms."

"We're allies, then?"

"Until we have broken the power of the golden folk."

Jacob Garth extended his white, puffy hand. Price took it, and was amazed again at the crushing strength beneath the smooth soft skin.

AT SUNRISE the next morning a veritable army was winding through the palm groves of El Yerim, from the camp and the town beside the tiny lake. The clattering tank led the van. Behind rode men on camels, in a close, double column.

Jacob Garth and swart, sloe-eyed Joao de Castro, at the head of the *farengi,* a score of hard-bitten adventurers, their pack animals laden with machine-guns, the mountain artillery, Stokes mortars, and high explosives.

The sheikh Fouad el Akmet riding before his two-score *nakhawilah* or renegades, who were proudly girt with glittering cartridge belts and carrying new Lebel rifles.

Price Durand, resplendent in the golden mail of Iru, riding beside Yarmud at the head of nearly five hundred eager warriors of the Beni Anz.

As the interminable line of fighting-men crept out of the green palm groves of the fertile valley, to the desolate, fire-born plateau, they came in view of *Hajar Jehannum,* or Verl, as the Beni Anz named the mountain—a steep-walled, basaltic butte, the core of an ancient volcano, crowned with a towered palace ablaze with myriad splintering gleams of white and gold.

An exultant cheer rolled back along the columns, as each successive group came within view of the mountain, with the bright promise of its coronal of marble and yellow metal.

Price's heart lifted. Involuntarily he urged his *hejin* to a faster gait, fondled the oaken helve of Korlu, the great ax. Aysa must be a prisoner within that scintillating castle. Aysa, the fair, brave girl of the desert.

"Great is the day!" Yarmud shouted beside him, kicking his own camel to make it keep pace. "Before sunset the castle of Verl is ours. At last the golden folk shall die——"

Fear stilled his voice. Silently, pale-faced, he pointed at the bleak mountain still fifteen miles away. The whole long column had abruptly halted; a dry whisper of terror raced along it.

"The shadow of the golden folk!" came Yarmud's fear-roughened voice.

A brilliant fan of light was lifting into

the indigo sky ahead. Narrow rays of rose and topaz mingled in an inverted, splendid pyramid of flame. The apex of the pyramid touched the highest golden tower. The colored rays were up-flung from the castle.

Above the fan of saffron and rosy glory a picture appeared. Vague at first, looming gigantic as if projected on the dome of the blue heavens, it swiftly took form, color, reality.

A gigantic snake, vast as a cloud, coiled in the air above the mountain. A heap of yellow coils, the evil head uplifted upon a slender gleaming aureate column. A serpent of gold. Each brilliant scale glinted like polished metal. The head dropped upon the upmost coil, and the snake's eyes, glittering black, insidious, looked down upon the halted, fearful columns.

Beside the serpent was a woman—the same woman, Price knew, that he had seen upon the tiger, in the mirage above the mountain pass. A yellow coil, thick as her body, was looped about her feet, and she half reclined against the next, an arm caressingly over it.

The woman's body was yellow as the snake, and it had something of the serpent's slender, sinuous grace. A short, tight-fitting tunic of green encased it, hiding no undulating line. Red-golden, flowing loose and abundant, her hair fell over her yellow shoulders.

The woman looked down from the sky, a mockingly malefic smile upon her oval, exotic face. Her full lips, crimsoned, were voluptuous and cruel; the lids of her piquantly slanted eyes dark-edged; the shadowed orbs themselves tawny-green.

Price watched those greenish, oblique eyes rove the columns, questingly, and fasten suddenly upon himself. The woman, apparently, saw him as plainly as he did her, whatever the strange agency of her projection. She stared down at him, boldly. In her gaze was a curious intimacy.

Then puzzlement and vague alarm came into the tawny eyes, as they absorbed the golden mail, the oval buckler, the yellow ax. But still they held a taunting challenge, an enigmatic promise, too, oddly disturbing. The slim yellow body relaxed against the thick, heaped golden coils of the snake. Reddened fingers shook out the ruddy-golden hair until it rippled in shimmering cascades.

Price was swept with a surge of fierce desire for that full-curved, sinuous body. He felt swift will to meet the taunting mockery in the greenish, slanted eyes. Lust, not love. Nothing of the spirit, nothing reverent.

He laughed at the woman, derisively. She flung back the silken-gold net of hair, abruptly, and anger flashed in the tawny eyes. No doubt that she saw him.

He looked away from her, at the snake. Even by comparison with the looming shadow of the woman it was large, its golden-scaled body thicker than her own. Like an ominous cloud, it hung in the sky above the black mountain, above the outspread fan of arrowed rays. Flat, triangular, ugly, its great head watched.

Its glittering eyes were terrible; black with a hint of purple, unwinking, aflame with cold light. Price's pulse slowed with instinctive fear as he met them, icy needles danced along his spine. The eyes of the snake were wells of cold evil, agleam with sinister wisdom older than mankind. They were hypnotic.

Price had wondered how a rabbit feels, frozen in fascinated trance, as the stalking snake writhes near. In that moment he knew. He felt the cold, deadly shock of resistless, malign *power*, intangible, inexplicable, yet terrifyingly real.

With an effort he dragged his gaze

away from those motionless, hypnotic orbs. His body, to his surprize, was tense, covered with chill sweat.

Looking back along the columns, he saw that a strange quietness had fallen, a silence almost of death. Every man was gazing fascinated into the mirage. Clatter of voices was stilled. No outcry rose, even of wonder or fear.

"Attention!" he shouted. Then, in Arabic: "Don't look at the snake. Turn away. Look back toward the oasis. The snake has no power unless you watch it."

A deep sigh beside him. And Yarmud's low voice:

"The snake threatens. We will win no easy victory. Its eyes can destroy us."

"Let's go on." Price urged his camel forward.

"Then sing the ax-song. The men are afraid."

Price lifted his voice in the battle-song of the ancient barbarian king whose armor he wore. A wave of cheering rolled back along the column, at first feeble and uncertain, but rising in volume.

And the long line crept forward again.

15. Mirrors of Peril

AS THE hours went by and the camel-mounted columns wound onward, the weird mirage hung ominously in the sky ahead, tawny-green eyes of the golden woman and purple-black orbs of the snake gazing down. At times the phenomenon appeared curiously near. It seemed to draw steadily away, as the expedition advanced, keeping a uniform distance.

Price speculated upon possible scientific explanations of it, without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion. The mirage, he knew, must be simply the colossal reflection of real beings, produced by the application of optical laws unknown to the outside world.

The hypnotic or paralytic effect of the snake's eyes was even more puzzling. He supposed that the golden reptile merely possessed the slight power of fascination of the ordinary snake, increased in proportion to its size, and perhaps intensified or amplified in the same manner as its body was magnified in the mirage.

The men remained subdued and frightened. The courage of Fouad and his Bedouins was maintained only by their confidence in the tank and the other invincible weapons of the *farengi* band. The Beni Anz were similarly sustained by a faith in Price as a supernatural deliverer.

Many times the column lagged. Price and Jacob Garth and Yarmud rode continually back and forth, encouraging the men, warning them not to look into the maddening mirage hanging ahead, where the snake's eyes gleamed with the cold and deadly fascination of ancient and sinister wisdom.

As they drew near the mountain, Price sent out scouts.

FIVE miles from the black, basaltic mass, the head of the column reached the edge of a shallow *wadi*, a valley a thousand yards across. Three scouts, upon fleet *hejins*, were half across its level floor, when the low black lava-crowned hills above the opposite slope burst into menacing life.

Scores of blue-clad men appeared from nowhere, dragging to the hill-crest great, silvery, ellipsoid mirrors that flickered in the sun; mirrors supported upon metal frames, like the one that had slain the Arab Hamed with an invisible ray of cold, in the mountain pass.

Broad bright ellipsoids wavered and shimmered in the sun. Queer flashes of violet darted from them, strangely painful to the eye.

At first appearance of the enemy, the

three scouts turned and dashed madly back, but not swiftly enough to escape the mirrors. The camel in the lead stumbled and fell. Rider and mount shattered, splintered, when they struck the ground, bodies suddenly chilled to the point of brittleness. The fragments quickly were silvered with frost.

An instant later the second man went down, in a swirl of snow-flakes. Then the third, with a crash like breaking glass.

Fear swept the column on the low lava hills above the *wadi*. The brooding menace of the mirage had been endurable because it was distant, half unreal. These mirrors of cold were as terrifyingly strange, and they were immediately dangerous. Bedouins and Beni Anz stirred uneasily, but at sight of Price and Jacob Garth unmoved ahead of them, held their ground.

Defense was swiftly organized. Garth boomed rapid orders. The Krupp mountain guns, the four Hotchkiss machine-guns, the two Stokes mortars, were quickly unpacked, mounted in covered positions along the hilltop.

The sheikh Fouad El Akmet's men were gathered behind the tank to follow it in the first charge. The four hundred and eighty warriors of the Beni Anz, armed, save for a hundred archers, only with long swords and spears, were held for the moment in reserve, in the rear.

The two little cannons were soon thudding regularly, sweeping the opposite slope of the *wadi* with screaming shrapnel. The Hotchkiss guns broke into rattling music, and snipers, flung prone, nursed barking rifles.

A few minutes longer the mirrors flashed with eye-searing violet. Little swirls of frost appeared in the air about the gunners, and several men fell, shivering, temporarily paralyzed. But the range was apparently too great for effective use of the mirrors. They were dragged back beyond the lava ridge, out of view again.

Price and Jacob Garth, near the guns, scanned the opposite side of the *wadi* through binoculars. A dozen still blue forms were sprawled there, victims of bullets and shrapnel splinters. But the living had vanished.

"Our move," Garth observed, serenely bland as ever. "Can't afford to leave the initiative up to them. And the ammunition for the Krupps won't hold out all day."

He turned to boom orders.

The gray-armored tank lumbered over the crest of the hill. At top speed it rumbled down the slope and clanked across the *wadi's* stony floor, machine-guns hammering. Behind it raced Fouad's Bedouins, with their new Lebel rifles.

In undisciplined but splendid charge the Arabs dashed after the tank, throwing up their rifles to fire in headlong career. They were half-way across the valley when the mirrors of cold were pushed back to the hill before them, from concealed trenches.

One Arab fell with his camel into a frosty heap of shattered fragments. Another, then two more, went down in clouds of glittering ice. Then the tank was abruptly white, gleaming argent.

A few seconds it lumbered on. Price hoped that its armor had been proof against the ray; remembered how nearly he had been frozen in it, back in the Jebel Harb. The roaring motor faltered, died. The tank veered, turned broadside to the enemy, stood silent and motionless, a silvery ghost of itself. He felt quick regret for old Sam Sorrows.

Though the Krupps and machine-guns were still raining death upon the blue-clad crews of the mirrors, the tank's failure shattered the morale of the Arabs. Wheeling their racing dromedaries, they

plunged back in mad retreat. And two more fell as they fled.

Disaster was unpleasantly near, Price realized. The proudest weapon of the *farengi* had fallen a quick victim to the mirrors of cold. Another such reverse would set the Arabs in panic flight.

"Want to try a charge with your natives, Durand?" asked Garth. "That's about the only chance. We'll be helpless when the ammunition's gone."

Price looked across the *wadi* with narrowed eyes. It would cost many lives to gain the opposite hill; but, if they retreated now, the Beni Anz would never find courage to advance again.

"All right," he told Garth.

"Good luck. I'll keep up the fire." The big man took his hand in that puffy paw that was so surprizingly strong.

Five minutes later Price rode down into the *wadi*, swinging the golden ax and raising his voice in the barbaric chant of Iru. Behind his racing *hejin* came the Beni Anz warriors, in long, irregular lines and scattered groups, scattered purposely.

HALF a mile ahead was the low, lava-crowned hill, glittering with half a score of huge, spinning mirrors. Blue-robed men crowded about them, many falling beneath Garth's fire, but others springing from the hidden trenches to replace them.

Camels' feet beat upon the stony ground with a vast, hollow thunder. Eager, exultant cries rang out, repeated phrases of the ax-song: "Kill . . . Korlu the red doom . . . Drinker of life-blood . . . Keeper of death-gate."

Ellipsoid mirrors swayed and spun, flashed painfully violet.

Price did not look back. Shouting the ax-song, he charged straight on; but he heard the screams of terror, and sharp, splintering crashes, like the shattering of myriad panes of glass—the sound of frozen men and camels, smashing to fragments on the rocks.

A blast of icy air struck his face, misty with floating ice-crystals — breath-taking. A freezing ray had come perilously near.

He rode on. The wild drumming of feet behind did not falter.

At last Price's dromedary was leaping up the hill, toward the nearest mirror. The broad, shimmering ellipsoid swung toward him—a six-foot sheet of silvery metal, mounted upon a delicate, elaborate mechanism.

Two blue-robes were behind it, the glittering brand of the snake upon their foreheads. As one turned the mirror, another manipulated a little knob.

Price saw a violet glow flush the argent metal.

Then he had leapt his camel upon the machine. It collapsed, with a rending and crashing of metal. The *hejin* fell sprawling. Price sprang clear of the saddle, plunged for the two blue-robes with the great ax.

It all took place with the disordered swiftness of a dream.

One moment, a dozen blue-clad snake-men were surrounding Price, with wicked, double-curved yellow *yataghans*. The next, the charging Beni Anz were rolling about him like a resistless wave.

Fire from Krupps and machine-guns had ceased as they neared the ridge. And the mirrors of cold ceased to function as their crews were ridden down by camel-mounted warriors.

Savage battle raged for a few minutes along the hilltop, with no quarter given. Two hundred of the Beni Anz had fallen upon the *wadi* floor, but those who survived to reach the hill exacted a terrible price for their fallen comrades.

A little time of utter confusion. Blue

snake-men rallying about their mirrors. Camels crashing through them, kicking, slashing with yellow tusks. Men and camels falling, before arrow and *jataghan* and spear.

Price, on foot, held his own. The great ax drank blood, and the barbaric song of Iru still rang out.

Then, abruptly, amazingly, the battle was won.

Along the crest of the hill stood the great mirrors, twisted, wrecked. Around them, and in the shallow, lava-walled trenches behind them, lay motionless, gory blue-clad bodies — the snake-men were down, to the last man. Here and there were camels, dead or dying. The survivors of the Beni Anz, no more than half the number that had begun the charge, were swiftly stripping the dead, loading camels with their loot.

Behind lay the grim black *wadi* floor, scattered with white, shattered heaps that had been men and camels, the silvery, silent tank among them.

Price looked toward the mountain.

Five miles away across the bleak, dark desolation of the lava fields rose its forbidding basaltic masses; cyclopean black pillars and columns, soaring up two thousand feet, to the glittering splendor of snowy marble and burnished gold that was the palace of the yellow people.

From the dome of the highest gorgeous tower yet spread the fan of lanced rays of rose and topaz light. Above the rays, the weird mirage still hung. Braving the serpent's hypnotic eyes, Price ventured another glance at it.

The yellow woman, still beside the giant snake, still caressing it, met his glance with a mocking, derisive smile, and shrugged her slim yellow shoulders, as much as to say: "Perhaps you have won, but what of it?"

"Malikar!" wailed one of the Arabs in sudden terror. "Malikar comes! On the golden tiger!"

Dropping his eyes from the mirage, Price saw the yellow tiger running across the lava plain from the mountain. A gigantic beast, fully the size of an ordinary elephant, it carried the ebon *howdah*, with Malikar, the golden man, seated in it.

Still several miles away, the giant cat was covering distance at a surprizing rate. Obviously terrified, the Beni Anz warriors frantically loaded the last of their plunder, and began leading their camels back into the *wadi*.

16. The Strange Eyes of the Snake

IT WAS now high noon. Merciless white sun-flame drove down upon the lifeless volcanic plain beyond the ridge, across which the yellow tiger was running, and beat upon the rugged lava slopes below the towering, basaltic cone of *Hajar Jehannum*. No wind stirred; the air trembled with stinging heat.

After a few moments' thought, Price decided to retire into the *wadi* he had just crossed at such expense in human lives, to await Malikar's coming. He did not like to retreat before a single man. But he was not sure that Malikar was a man; he wanted to get beneath the cover of Jacob Garth's guns.

Midway across the stony floor, where the grisly piles of white were now turning red, he stopped the Arabs, waited, dispatching a note to Jacob Garth to inform him of the victory on the hill and warn him of Malikar's coming.

Very soon the yellow tiger appeared upon the hill, among the wrecked mirrors of cold and the bodies of the blue-robed dead. For a time the gigantic beast stood there, Malikar sitting in the *howdah*, robed in red, staring about him.

Then the Krupp guns began to fire

again. Price heard the whine of shrapnel above his head. And he saw white smoke burst up near the motionless tiger, where high explosive shells were falling.

Then a strange thing happened.

Malikar stood up in the *howdah,* turned back to face the mirage still hanging in the sky above the black mountain. He flung out his arms in a gesture of command.

The yellow woman turned, and appeared to speak to the snake.

Gigantic, incredible, bright scales glittering metallic, xanthic yellow, the great serpent moved in the sky. The broad flat wedge of its head was lifted high, upon the slender, shining gold column of its neck. To and fro it swayed, slowly, regularly, purple-black eyes hypnotically a-glitter.

Price tried to draw his eyes away from the snake—and could not! Strange and coldly evil, those swaying, hypnotic orbs riveted him with baleful fascination. His whole body was paralyzed. He could scarcely breathe. A throbbing oppression was in his head; his throat was dry, constricted; his limbs were cold.

Sounds of firing ceased, from the guns across the *wadi;* Price knew that the others had also been seized by this incredible paralysis.

Brilliant purple-black, the serpent's eyes shone with cold force of utter evil. Dark wisdom filled them—wisdom older than the race of man. Overwhelming, resistless *will.*

Price began a battle to move. Deadly paralysis claimed him. A dull weight rested on his brain; his head swam. Suffocation choked him. Coldness crept up his limbs, prickling deadness.

But he was not going to surrender. He wasn't going to let himself be hypnotized by a snake. Not even a golden snake, in a mirage of madness. A matter of wills. He would *not* be mastered!

His head was turning, involuntarily, to follow the swaying serpent's orbs. He tensed the muscles of his neck, struggled to keep his head motionless, to turn his eyes downward.

Then his whole body tensed. He had the incredible sensation that the snake realized his resistance, was increasing the hypnotic power that chained him. Price set his jaw, jerked his head down.

All his will went into the effort. And a cord of evil seemed to snap. He was free. Weak, trembling, with a feeling of nausea in the pit of his stomach, but free! He dared himself to look back at the snake's eyes. And the dread paralysis did not return. He had proved his mastery.

Price turned, reeling uncertainly. He saw a sickening thing.

Standing about him were two-score Beni Anz warriors, afoot, as he was. All were frozen in rigid paralysis, staring up into the mirage. Mute, helpless terror was on their white, sweat-beaded faces. Their eyes were glazed, they breathed slowly, gaspingly. And Malikar was murdering them.

The gold giant had dismounted from the yellow tiger, which stood two-score yards away. Swiftly he was passing from one to another of the motionless, paralyzed men, methodically stabbing each in the breast with a long, two-edged sword.

The men stood in tense paralysis, staring at the fatal mirage, heads turning a little to follow the swaying, hypnotic eyes of the snake. Helpless, naked horror was on their faces; they were unaware of Malikar, so near.

The yellow man worked swiftly, driving his blade with dexterous skill into unguarded breasts, withdrawing it with a

jerk as he pushed his victims backward, to sprawl with red blood welling out.

Outraged, half sick with the brutal horror of it, Price shouted something, sprang toward him.

Malikar turned suddenly, his red robe dripping with new blood. A moment he was startled, motionless, with fear unmistakable in his shallow, tawny eyes. Then he leapt to meet Price, brandishing his reeking blade.

Price met the sword-thrust with the golden buckler, and swung the ax. The yellow man sprang back; but the ax-blade grazed his shoulder, the bloody sword clattered from his fingers.

Price ran forward over the rocky ground, to follow up his advantage. Luck was against him. A loose stone turned under his foot; he stumbled, went heavily to his knees.

As he staggered back to his feet, Malikar leapt away, picked up a heavy block of lava, flung it at him. Price tried in vain to dodge. He felt the impact of the missile against his head; crimson flame seemed to burst from it, flaring through all his brain.

WHEN Price groaned and sat up it was just past sunset. The cool wind that had roused him was blowing down from the black mass of the mountain across the bleak lava flows northward. In the fading, rosy light the gold-and-white palace above the frowning walls was a splendorous coronal. And the mirage was gone.

Price woke where Malikar had felled him. The *wadi's* stony floor was red with piles of thawed flesh and shattered bone. Near him were the score of men Malikar had stabbed as they were helpless in that dread fascination of the snake, dark *abbas* and white *kafiyehs* scarlet-stained.

He was alone with the dead. Malikar was gone, with the tiger. And the Beni Anz, and Fouad's men, and Jacob Garth's. But the little tank still stood there, where the ray of cold had stopped it, in the middle of the *wadi*.

With a dull and heavy sense of despair, Price realized that once again Malikar had defeated him. Bitterly he recalled the stone that had turned under his foot. The Durand luck had failed again.

His allies must have retreated in mad haste; perhaps they had broken the spell of the mirage, even as he had done, and fled. The abandonment of the tank, of himself and the possessions of the men about him, was proof enough of flight.

Not again, after this reverse, would the Beni Anz follow him, he knew. "Iru" would be discredited. And Aysa—lovely Aysa of the many moods, serious and smiling, demure and gay, strange, daring fugitive of the sand-waste—was still locked in the mountain fortress ahead, more than ever hopelessly lost.

A missile flicked past Price's head and clattered startlingly on the bare lava. He heard the clatter of running feet, a hoarse shout of rage and hate. Still dazed, stiff of movement, Price staggered to his feet, turned to face the assailant who had crept up behind him in the twilight.

Wicked yellow *yataghan* upraised, the man was charging at him in the dusk, a dozen yards away. A tall Arab in a queerly hooded robe of blue. He must, like Price, be a survivor of the battle. He limped as he ran, or hopped grotesquely. And one side of his face was red horror, from which a wild eye, miraculously unharmed, glared with fanatic hate. On his high forehead was the gleaming yellow brand of a coiled serpent.

What Price Durand found in the golden city makes an amazing tale that will hold your breathless interest. You can not afford to miss this sensational narrative, in the July WEIRD TALES.

The Iron Man

By PAUL ERNST

A huge mechanical man, twenty feet in height, runs amuck in the city streets, leaving panic terror and dreadful death in its wake

"The gigantic pincers opened wide like the jaws of a steam shovel. They closed—"

MY EMOTIONS as I stepped into Amos Klegg's laboratory that night were half of awe and half of amusement. Which was not an unnatural mixture: Klegg is half to be respected for his really colossal scientific achievements and half to be grinned at for his vanity.

Vain? I have never known any one more vain! With a harmless sort of van-

ity, I'll admit. Perpetually the showman, he must stage-set every denouement, present it always in the most spectacular light.

For the past eight months he had apparently forgotten my existence, though I was his closest friend. Then, that morning, he had telephoned and demanded that I come that very evening to "Oh!" and "Ah!" over his latest brain-child. Demanded! That was the word. Klegg never invited; like royalty he took one's presence for granted.

Now here I was, waiting in his laboratory for him to come and parade his latest scientific marvel before my properly startled eyes.

I strolled through the great workroom. I was not impatient for him to come. Few had the privilege of being admitted to that enormous room; and there were plenty of weird and interesting things to look at. The room itself was weird-looking—two stories high, lighted by hanging electric bulbs that illuminated apparatus and work-benches well enough but left the high ceiling to soar dimly into shadow like the roof of a cave. A magician's cave, in a way; some of Klegg's performances certainly smacked of magic.

I noticed a great dim shape at the farther end of the laboratory. It was veiled under canvas, for all the world like a gigantic statue hidden from common eyes in a sculptor's workshop. Had Klegg gone in for art?

I started toward it, remarking as I went on the odd proportions of whatever figure it was beneath the canvas. The proportions were vaguely human. Heroic in size—the top of the cascading canvas scraped the roof twenty feet above the floor—whatever was beneath stuck out here and there as if possessed of such things as shoulders and head and torso.

I got a third of the way down the long room toward it when I stopped with a queer sensation of being watched. You know how it is. You are in a place alone, windows shuttered and locked (Klegg always kept his that way because his laboratory was on the ground level), no one there but yourself—and yet you feel as if unseen eyes were on you.

So strong was the feeling that I called aloud: "Klegg, are you here?"

There was no answer. The door through which Klegg's servant had admitted me was closed. Klegg was certainly not in that laboratory; nor was any one else save myself. Yet I was being watched. I'd have sworn to it.

Forgetting for the moment the mysterious, canvas-shrouded figure, I started slowly to tour the place. I looked under tables, behind any equipment big enough to offer cover for a marauder. I went into the alcove containing the washstand. I darted out again, thinking to surprize some one in the act of running for the door.

No one. I was utterly alone.

The inexplicable feeling began to give me the creeps. I remember wishing with almost childish panic that Klegg would hurry up and join me. I think I would have left the place had I not hated to display such weakness even to myself.

I did start for the switchboard over by the door, however. I was going to turn on more lights—all the lights—to get rid of that nasty, creepy feeling that eyes were following my every move.

And then I did get a jolt. A paralyzing one! For I located the eyes.

Beside the switchboard was a plate-glass case about a foot square and two feet high. It was standing on a table. And in it, just under the top, were the eyes.

Two eyes, undeniably human, glared at

me unblinkingly from the case. Unblinkingly? They could not have glared in any other way, for they had no eyelids to blink with. Nor were they set in eye-sockets, or surrounded by a skull. Just two naked eyeballs perched there behind glass and staring with dilated pupils into my own eyes—as though piercing clear to my soul.

WELL, I got over the jolt a bit, and began to investigate. I started by switching on a bulb that hung over the table for the special purpose of illuminating the case.

The case, I saw then, was full of a colorless fluid. And there was more, soaking placidly in the fluid, than a pair of eyeballs.

There was a brain behind the eyeballs, for one thing. A naked human brain, looking like the specimens you see pickled in glass jars at a medical school. The brain rested on a glass shelf near the top of the case. The eyes projected from the forepart of the wrinkled, grayish lump on two stalks that resembled antennæ. The stalks, I recognized, were the optic nerves.

Leading down from the brain, like small trailing power cables, were a score or more of grayish-white, elastic-looking tubes. These, as they descended, branched into four main tubes. And these main tubes were finally rooted in—a human heart!

Yes, there was no mistaking it. Lying on the floor of the case, like a pallid mushroom growth tinged with red, was a human heart. And what was more—it was beating.

Steadily, effortlessly, seventy or so to the minute, it pulsated before my gaze. Beat, beat, beat. And with every beat a perceptible impulse traveled along the elastic tubes on the right (why, they were human arteries!) to the brain resting above on the glass shelf. The brain itself pulsed faintly in unison; till the whole affair gave one a conviction that here was actual, though incredible, life.

A locomotive without its train. A power-house without its factory. A human heart and brain without a body; but certainly appearing to be alive and in fit shape to guide a body should one be presented.

Meanwhile, the staring, almost hypnotic eyes on their antennæ of optic nerves. . . .

"What do you think of it, Cleave?"

I jumped a foot, and only half succeeded in repressing a yell. Klegg had come in behind me, unheard, and had spoken without warning.

"You might cough, or something, just to let a man know you're around," I said reproachfully.

He smiled. "I see it has impressed you, at least."

"It certainly has," I replied. "Tell me—is the thing alive, or isn't it?"

"It is not, of course. You ought to know that. It's dead as mutton. But it has provided me with a lot of entertainment and a great deal of new knowledge concerning automatic reflex nerve-action. For instance, look."

He lit a match and held the flame close to the naked, appalling eyes. "Watch the pupils."

I watched them—black, dilated holes in twin rings of dark brown. And as I watched, they contracted from the brightness of the match flame. It was uncanny.

"Yet you say it's dead," I exclaimed.

"Certainly. That is, as brain and heart it is dead. The individual cells are alive, and they are still governed by the mysterious automatic influence we call reflex action."

He dropped the match stub to the floor and stepped on it.

"Looks impossible, doesn't it?" he commented. "Yet it is quite simple, really. Any kind of heart can be kept beating indefinitely if immersed in a neutral salt solution—sodium, calcium and potassium salts—and nourished with a little sugar. It's a common experiment. But I don't think any one has ever before taken both heart and brain from a newly killed human being, connected the two organs with fresh veins and arteries, and kept them functioning as one system."

I stared down at him—a little man, he was—dark as a Spaniard, with bristly black hair and eyebrows, and burning black eyes.

"But why the eyeballs?" I demanded, glancing again with a shudder at the sinister, staring orbs poised on their nerve-stalks like marbles.

"To observe more effectively the way the organs react to artificial nerve stimuli," Klegg said, with a carelessness that didn't fool me for a minute: he was pleased as a child at the way his experiment worked.

"By the way," he went on, "apart from its scientific interest, that brain is a most arresting lump of meat. It's the brain of Tuzloff. You've heard of him?"

My eyes opened at that. Heard of him? Who has not! Bomber, murderer, outlaw, he had left a grim trail of death behind him for two years, until an outraged state had finally captured and executed him. He had died screaming hate at the world. No one knew where he had come from, but every one knew his mad history. Tuzloff! My word!

"What a gruesome idea!" I exclaimed. "Imagine preserving that brain, of all others, and keeping it at your elbow day and night!"

Klegg smiled. "A dead brain is a dead brain, Cleave. It doesn't matter who owned it in life. Besides, we're reduced to getting our cadavers mainly from the state. More often than not the corpse stretched on the surgical slab is that of some criminal. But come away, and let me show you the real work I called you in to see."

"I thought that was it," I said, pointing to the heart and the brain from which sprouted the glaring eyeballs.

"Oh, no. That's quite an achievement, if I do say so myself. But the real achievement stands under that canvas shroud." And he started toward the gigantic, veiled figure I had noticed when I first was shown into the laboratory.

I FOLLOWED him, but I could still feel those exposed eyeballs boring into my back. They had no muscles to turn them, so their gaze could not follow my path. But I was sure that, with no sockets to restrict their vision, they could see me out of their "corners" wherever I went. It was devilish, that feeling. And I didn't lose it for a second in the laboratory that night.

"Here," said Klegg, his voice lowering, "is something really unique. But before I show it to you, let me explain some of the principles behind it.

"For years I have worked on the theory that the human brain gives off energy in rays as measurable and discoverable as any other rays. Thought-rays, you might call them. Recently I solved my problem. I discovered the pure thought-ray and to some extent analyzed its secret and measured its wave-length. I've found brain emanations to be a hitherto unknown form of electrical energy somewhat akin to magnetism. This energy is capable of being harnessed by the use of proper magnetic receptors. You understand?"

"After a fashion," I said.

"All right then"—his voice rang with triumph—"look!"

Dramatically he jerked the cord that swept away the canvas from the twenty-foot-high thing it had hidden. And as I saw what the canvas had concealed, I gasped and started back a pace.

It was a colossal man, of iron. Or, I should say, it was a grim metal travesty of a man.

Two stories up, brushing the roof of the lofty laboratory, was the thing's "head"—a steel cylinder two feet in diameter and a yard high. In this, to carry out human resemblance, were cut eye-holes.

The cylinder was set, like a hat-box atop a hogshead, on a larger cylinder that made up the torso of the monstrous thing. Through the top of the larger cylinder ran a heavy casting, a beam which protruded a yard on either side. These protrusions were the "shoulders" and from them hung cylindrical arms, jointed, and ending in two-clawed pincers that took the place of hands.

The whole rested on two ponderous steel columns of legs, and the legs ended in "feet" which were solid metal pyramids with pivot joints at the apices for ankles.

"Watch it," said Klegg proudly.

He stared at it fixedly, his forehead wrinkling as if in terrific mental concentration. (I found out later that this was sheer theatrics; thought no more profound than a wish for pancakes for breakfast was enough to work the mechanism.)

In an instant the monstrous robot was set in ponderous motion. The iron man slowly lifted its right leg, slowly extended it in a forward step, and as slowly set it down. The left leg followed suit. In two strides the enormous thing was almost on top of us.

With a cry I leaped aside to avoid being crushed. But it stopped there, obedient to Klegg's will. Then it backed into its former place, two strides in reverse. The floor, though of solid cement poured on the ground itself, quivered with its mass. Tons, it weighed.

"It looks impressive, doesn't it?" said Klegg. He almost crowed it. "Yet it's all a simple arrangement of weights, levers and steel cables, set in motion by the comparatively small pull of magnets which are acted upon by my thought—after being 'stepped-up' a good many million times. I can control the thing as though it were my own body."

"It's—it's heavy, isn't it?" was the best I could say.

"Twenty tons. You see, for every weight moved, I had to provide a counterweight. When I got through I found I had a regular steam-roller on my hands."

"What keeps it from falling over on its face?" I asked.

"A gyroscope, run by storage batteries in its chest." Klegg was beaming like a lad who shows off a home-made radio set with which he can get Australia. "The officials of the Easton Electric Company are coming to see me a week from tomorrow. They'll certainly see a demonstration!"

"They certainly will," I said weakly. "Why in heaven's name did you build the thing so big?"

"To make the demonstration more spectacular." Ah, there spoke his vanity again. "Tons of metal, so delicately balanced and counterbalanced that it can be moved solely by the power of thought! The idea was irresistibly alluring. And now that the thing is done, I can make it follow me about like a dog, if I wish."

"I wouldn't," I said, visioning little Klegg walking down Main Street with the towering colossus thundering meekly behind him.

He made the robot do more tricks for me. One was to pick up a telephone book

from a bench in its mighty pincers of hands. There wasn't much left of the book when it finished, but it picked it up, all right.

Then I left — side-stepping widely around the glass case in which were the brain and heart, and the horrible, alive-looking eyeballs which seemed to note our movements with devilish concentration.

I went home, to wonder at the amazing combination of scientific genius and vain-glorious little boy that was Klegg.

I had nightmares about the contents of that glass case. If ever anything looked alive, those glaring eyeballs did. Yet Klegg had assured me, as did my own common sense, that brain and heart and eyes were dead, though the individual cells composing them lived on in the salt solution.

FIVE days were destined to pass before I heard from Klegg again. And then he was to get in touch with me under circumstances so fantastic and terrible. . . .

But I'd better stick to some sort of order in my account.

Eleven o'clock in the evening of that fifth day. I had just come home and, minus collar and coat, was smoking a good-night pipe before turning in, when my telephone rang.

"Hello——" I began. But my voice was cut off by a wild rush of words avalanching over the wire.

"Cleave! Is that you? Cleave—this is Klegg. Cleave—for God's sake come over here at once! To my laboratory! You hear? The thing's got loose! Come at once—oh, my God! It's after me——"

There was a crash, a sound like distant thunder over the telephone, then silence.

"Klegg!" I called, stupidly shaking the telephone as if it were his shoulder I had hold of. "Klegg! What's wrong?"

But there was no answer; and in a second or two I had collected my wits. I tore out into the warm summer night, hatless and collarless and in my shirt sleeves, and jumped a taxi for Klegg's laboratory.

The front part of his house was all in darkness. I pounded at the door, rang the bell furiously. No one answered. I remembered then that it was the night off for Klegg's servants. Klegg alone—no one to help or admit help—and he in some terrible trouble. . . .

But what could the trouble be? Burglars? No. Klegg had said *it* was after him. *It* was loose.

With knuckles bleeding from the fruitless pounding at the door, I raced around to the rear of the house. Here, a separate brick building connected with the house by a short, covered runway, was the laboratory.

"Klegg!" I shouted as I came. "It's I—Cleave. Can you open the back door, or a window——"

I stopped, then, and stared, stupefied, at the wall of the laboratory.

From ground level to roof there was a yawning hole in the solid wall. And scattered over the lawn and sidewalk were the bricks that had filled that space, some broken to chips and some crushed to dust. A charge of dynamite could have done no more damage.

Then I saw, in the strip of lawn between sidewalk and laboratory, a single hole, like a footprint save that it was a yard square and ten inches deep. And I knew, of course, what *it* was that had got loose.

"Klegg!" I cried again, leaping in through the gaping hole in the wall. "Klegg!"

The laboratory was in ruins. Every bit of apparatus, every work-bench and instrument was crushed as flat as if a steam-roller had been methodically driven from side to side and end to end of the place. The electric globes blazed down on a

ruin more complete than an earthquake could have produced.

"Klegg, where are you?"

I heard a low moan from near the door.

I jumped in that direction, saw a figure lying on the cracked cement near it—and stopped in horror.

It was Klegg, or, rather, what was left of him. How he had managed to live during the minutes of my coming is more than I'll ever be able to figure out. Pure will-power, I guess.

From the waist down he was a ghastly pulp. His chest . . . well, I won't go into details.

His eyes were glazing even as I looked into them; plainly he had only a few seconds left.

"The iron man," he whispered. "Broke away, stalking the city . . . loose . . . twenty tons of death. . . ."

"But how could it break away?" I demanded. "It has no will of its own; it's just a mass of steel."

". . . brain," whispered Klegg, "brain in glass case. It was alive . . . *alive!* And I . . . put case and all in iron man's head. Something made me . . . like hypnotism. . . ."

"Yes," I urged. "Yes. . . ."

But Klegg was past urging. He was dead.

I stared down at the pitiably twisted thing that had once been a human being. So small, so inconsequential-looking. But what a monstrous thing it had done!

The iron man, twenty tons of invulnerable metal, stalking through the crowded city—directed by the maniacal, revengeful brain of the mad Tuzloff! Twenty tons of steel, guided by a soft gray lump of pure hate in a salt solution! What horrible possibilities were there!

"May God forgive you, Klegg," I murmured. "For I'm afraid mankind never will."

Yet it wasn't his fault, really. That malevolent brain—which had been alive after all, as my every instinct had warned—shut up alone with him week after week, working on his unsuspecting mind, slowly dominating it, sapping into it, imposing its own will on Klegg's—till finally the scientist's will had snapped and he had mesmerically obeyed its command and given it a new body of steel.

"Yes, yes," I mumbled in the wrecked laboratory, "easy to see how it happened. But what in God's name can be done to stop it?"

That naked heart would beat in its salt solution till the containing case was smashed; and while it pulsed the brain would live to guide its fantastic engine of destruction. The engine itself would continue upright as long as the storage batteries retained energy to drive the gyroscopic controls in its iron breast. Left to itself, the thing might function for days.

Meanwhile, gory death as it tramped the city under the control of a criminally insane brain!

"IT'S GOT to be stopped!" I babbled, starting to run through the yawning hole in the brick wall. "It *must* be stopped! But how?"

On the sidewalk, I turned instinctively to the right. To the right lay the main avenue of the city, a car-line street leading straight toward the downtown section. That would be Tuzloff's destination.

No sooner had I turned into the brightly lighted main avenue than I saw I would have no difficulty trailing the iron man. What a wake it had left!

At this section of the street, not a living soul moved on sidewalk or pavement. Yet excitement and horror seethed in the very air. Moans and screams were coming

from every window above the second floor level. And from every window people peered fearfully.

I stood in the center of the street and gazed around.

At the curb on one side were the remains of a touring-car. It was smashed flat. The steering-wheel was crushed on its twisted column, and embedded in a gory ruin. A small sedan that had been parked in front of it had also been squeezed flat; but this car, as far as I could see, luckily had been empty.

On the rails of the car track was a ghastly mound of wreckage. A street-car, or what was left of it. It had been pushed over on its side and painstakingly demolished. Roof and sides were splintered to nothing. Only the solid undercarriage was left fairly intact. And around the shattered car were at least a score of bodies—great, shapeless smears on the pavement.

"Look out!" I remember hearing some woman shriek. "Look out! It'll get you, too!"

I only half heard the warning. Trembling, white-faced, I began to hurry down the avenue in the monstrous trail of the iron man.

Wrecked automobiles littered the pavement every few feet. Some were at the curb, some in the middle of the street. The latter in every case were spattered with crimson. The iron man had evidently caught them as they rolled toward him —drivers no doubt petrified with horror —stamped them flat with a single stride, and gone on.

Street-cars knocked over and demolished, trolley poles broken off like celery stalks to trail live wires on the pavement, horrible red blotches everywhere on the slippery street—a tornado could not have left a plainer path.

And now, from far ahead, on the fringe of the downtown section, I heard a din that grew louder as I hurried toward it. Shouts, yells, screams, a lurid red flare as a fire started some place near, and over it all the thunderous crashing of some great weight pounding along the pavement.

In a moment or two I got within half a block of the thing. And there I paused, rigid at the spectacle.

Glinting dully in the reflected light of street lamps and electric signs was the iron man, stalking down the street ahead of me.

Two stories up swayed the cylindrical head in which were the artificially preserved heart and the mad brain. Two stories tall the figure teetered down the street, like a reeling tower. A three-yard step. Five seconds while the counterbalanced weights slid in accordance to the magnetic controls, lifting the other leg high and lowering it in advance. Another step. Five seconds. Another step. And with every step a crashing boom of twenty tons of metal banging down on stone paving—or on an automobile or human body.

Slowly the tower of the body leaned forward like a falling cliff with each advancing step, straightened as the stride was taken, leaned backward as the next was begun. Its giant arms, ending in the mighty pincers, clanged against its metal sides as it moved. Back and forth, back and forth, with each forward lunge carrying it farther toward the heart of the downtown district—and the theater and supper crowds teeming there.

In spite of the thickening of the crowds, however, the occasional red smears on the pavement grew no more numerous. The iron man moved too slowly to overtake many victims. Thus, though people were pouring toward the source of the commotion with mob curiosity from every direc-

tion, the metal monster had its appetite glutted but seldom. People who fell in its path in their mad scramble to get away once they had seen what manner of thing was making the noise; people who chanced to dash out of building entrances squarely in its road; people who tried crazily to hide under cars or in too shallow doorways—these were the only ones caught under the huge descending pyramids of iron.

And so the thing moved forward with the steady, inexorable advance of a glacier, making every five-second stride demolish something — property, and more rarely, but still only too often, life; something—on its devastating way.

A gray-haired man, erect of carriage, blazing-eyed, with a military appearance, rushed out of a restaurant and toward me.

"Gad, sir!" he spluttered. "Gad, sir! Is it war? Is this some new kind of tank directed by radio?"

He rushed off without waiting for an answer. I saw him blaze away with an automatic at the back of the iron man. The bullets glanced off the rounded steel body like peas from a child's bean-blower. There were others shooting at it, also. Half a dozen police were there, pumping futile bullets at it.

At one minute I saw the half-dozen police and the military-looking man in a close group at the monster's heels—at the next I saw the iron man, with fiendish suddenness, reverse its stride and step backward instead of forward.

It got two of the group as they fell over each other trying to get out of the way.

The soul of Tuzloff, mad murderer, must have rejoiced in its niche in hell. Unless Tuzloff's soul, with Tuzloff's conscious intelligence, was in the glass case with his heart and brain. . . . Could souls be kept in salt solutions, too? I wondered crazily as I racked my brain for a way to stop this awful destruction.

THE shriek of a police siren sounded far off to the right. Then another, and another. A general riot call had evidently been turned in at last.

I ran down the side street toward the wailing police cars, leaving for the moment the main street on which the iron man was sowing broadcast the seed of ruin. Of all the crowd, I was the only one who knew the true nature of the colossus. It was up to me to put my knowledge at the disposal of the blue-coated fighters about to do battle with it.

Down the street toward me came a line of cars filled with blue-uniformed figures. I stopped the first by the simple method of standing squarely in its path and waving my arms, meanwhile refusing to budge from its charge. I thought at first the car meant to run me down, heedless of one life by reason of the emergency of the call ahead. But at the last minute it skidded to a halt. I jumped onto the running-board.

A big man with a grizzled mustache, whose star shone gold instead of silver, glared at me.

"Who the hell are you," he snapped, "and why the hell are you holding us up?"

"Who I am doesn't matter," I said. "I stopped you because I know all about the thing up ahead you're out to fight."

There was a hubbub from the other six men in the car.

"You do?"

"What is it, then?"

"Where is it?"

The man with the gold star held up his hand for silence.

"We were told that some lunatic had got hold of an army tank and was running wild in it. Is that true? If it is, we'd bet-

ter phone the Fort for soldiers and field artillery."

"It's not a tank," I said rapidly. "It's an iron man, twenty feet high and proof against rifle or revolver bullets."

"An iron man!" repeated the chief, staring.

"Aw, throw him off the running-board and let's get going," some one growled savagely.

"I'm not crazy," I said. "For God's sake, listen to me! This thing is a big machine, in the shape of a man, twenty feet high. It's made of iron and it travels on two legs."

"How is it run?" was the skeptical question.

The words of the military-looking gentleman—now a smear on the pavement—occurred to me. I reconsidered my idea of telling the fantastic truth about the iron giant. Better to say something that sounded credible than try, in this crowded moment, to cram the true facts down their throats.

"It's run by radio," I said. "But listen: the radio-control mechanism is in the thing's head, a two-foot steel cylinder on top of the rest of the machine. This cylinder has two holes in it, like eye-holes. The thing to do is sharpshoot through one of those holes and smash the radio-control. Once that's done, the machine stops working. Get me?"

"Got you," he said. "But first we'll draw a cordon around this section to keep these fools from rushing in and risking their lives. Steve, flag the rest and tell 'em to block off the streets four blocks each way from here. And you"—he stabbed his blunt forefinger at me—"ride the running-board till we get to this thing ahead."

The police driver jammed into gear and we sped forward. Half a block to the main avenue. A block to the right.

"Good God!" muttered the chief, staring at the monstrous moving tower, reddened half-way up its columnar legs, that was steadily working forward along the shambles of a street.

Even as we stared, the iron man reaped a ghastly windfall. A score of people, instead of trying to run, had stupidly crammed into the body of a big closed truck parked at the curb, to hide from the nightmare thing of metal that was trampling toward them.

The iron man stopped. One great leg went out, to push against the truck. The truck rocked half off its wheels but stayed upright. Yells and shrieks came from within it. A few—all too few—managed to leap out and get away. The rest . . .

The iron man pushed again. The truck leaned farther, balanced an instant, then smashed onto its side.

A great iron pyramid of a foot lifted—descended—lifted again.

With a groan the chief whirled to his men.

"Into the buildings ahead of it," he snapped. "Second-story windows—level with the damned thing's head. Concentrate fire on the eye-holes. Sub-machine guns. Quick!"

THE men jumped out of the car, five of them, one a strapping blond young fellow hardly more than a lad. I noticed him then because he seemed so young—he couldn't have been more than twenty-two. And later . . . well, the whole city united in placing him on a hero's pedestal.

The five rushed forward, skirting around the iron man, fighting their way by main force through the screaming mob, till they were fifty yards ahead. Then they burst in the doors of the department stores flanking the street at that section and ran up to the second-floor windows. There they stationed themselves, two on one side of the street, three on the other, guns

ready to belch lead at the two-foot cylinder housing the "radio-control mechanism."

The chief stayed behind with me. As fast as he could load his revolver, he fired at the turret of a head. But no result was apparent. Hundreds of bullets had been fired at the iron man by now—from the guns of police and a few civilians—with the same lack of result. No armored tank could have been more impervious to gunfire.

"Tons of metal, moved solely by the power of thought!" Klegg had built his man so heavy "to make the demonstration more spectacular."

Well, the demonstration was proving spectacular enough!

"The boys'll get it through the eye-holes," said the chief, stopping his vain firing at last. "Every mother's son of 'em is a marksman. You wait."

By now the iron man was within thirty yards of the windows where the men waited for it. We held our breaths.

Thud. A five-second interlude, agonizingly long, while one great leg lifted ponderously to be set down before the other, the tower of a body swaying slowly back and then inclining forward. Thud. Five seconds again. Thud.

Smash! Bang! A glittering limousine reduced to a tangled mass of wreckage. Crash! A trolley pole snapped off at its base.

How Tuzloff must have been laughing, had he lips to laugh with! Never in life could his distorted mind have compassed a hundredth of the damage a scientist's mistake was granting him in death.

A stabbing flame burst at last from the second-story window on the iron man's left. Another came from the right, converging toward the ghastly, cylindrical head.

There was a wild clanging of bullets on steel. Slight dents appeared in the cylinder in swift succession, like dents in the surface of a puddle of water in a rainstorm.

"They've got it! They've got it!" shouted the chief.

But they hadn't got it. My simple idea of firing into the eye-holes to break the glass case and spill its contents—heart, brain, salt solution and all — was not going to work. And the next instant the chief saw it too.

There is no doubt that Tuzloff's brain could "hear" the bullets that beat against the monstrous iron body. The shock of these impacts must certainly have sent vibrations to the sound areas of the cortex, in its fluid solution. The "sound" may have been slight; it may have battered terribly against the raw, exposed brain surface; at any rate it was certainly sensed.

With the first indication that here at last was a really efficient and well-directed fire, the iron man stopped in its tracks. It couldn't lower its head to present the blank top of the cylinder to the hail of bullets; there was no neck to bend. It couldn't incline its whole body, save for the slight leaning backward and forward of walking, because of the gyroscopic controls.

But it could—and did—turn around so that its cartoon of a "face" was no longer in danger from the bullets of the men in the windows ahead of it.

Back it came, over the red road it had traveled. Back directly toward the chief and myself. And now the chief began firing again, slowly, taking careful aim. But the eye-holes were small; the two-foot cylinder was moving in a difficult arc; and the only light was that from electric signs and the few street lamps the giant had left unbroken. No bullet hit near the mark.

Both ponderous arms extended slowly,

toward us. The clanking pincers stretched wide, then lunged in our direction.

We ran.

Fifty feet away we stopped and looked back. The iron terror, we saw, was still stubbornly following us. But—we saw something else.

Behind the iron man, keeping pace with it and so near it would have crushed him had it fallen over backward, was a blue-clad figure. And this figure was swinging a coil of rope picked up in one of the department stores.

It was the blond youngster who had ridden in the chief's car.

"Doyle!" muttered the chief. "But what's he up to? Does he think he can trip that thing with rope? It would snap rope like thread!"

But it seemed that was not the blond young giant's idea.

Deliberately he drew still closer to the crashing iron monster. He started whirling his noose, awkwardly, inexpertly, but managing to keep the loop fairly widespread. He cast it—and cast it upward. The cast failed, but the chief and I gasped as we noted his target.

He was trying to lasso the cylindrical head.

"But what will he do if he succeeds, eh?" snapped the chief. "That is, if it's possible for him to succeed—and not be smashed like a potato-bug in the trying."

I shook my head. It was beyond me. Then both of us hopped back a few hasty steps. The iron man was pursuing us like a slow-moving avalanche, relentlessly, steadily, everything else but our destruction seeming for the moment to be forgotten by it.

Or was it *my* destruction the thing wanted? Had the naked, diabolical eyeballs, glaring through one or other of the head-holes, recognized me as a friend of Klegg's? Had the brain behind the eyes realized that I knew of its existence, and decided that I must be crushed before the other work of destruction could be resumed? It was more than possible.

At any rate the iron man appeared just then to have no target in mind but us. And we let it be so. Our backward progress was deliberately kept slow enough so that the clanging pincers were constantly within a few yards of us. For, as the chief said: "Looks like our play now is to keep it occupied till Doyle can do—whatever it is he's trying to do."

Again the blond youngster, Doyle, made an awkward cast with his loop. This time the noose settled clumsily around the head. Doyle drew it tight.

"And now what?" I breathed, staring wide-eyed at the man in the monster's tracks.

"Back!" roared the chief.

I barely made it. I'd been almost fatally interested in the maneuvers of Doyle. And while I was watching them, the iron man had got almost too close. I'll swear the pincers fanned my face as they swept downward.

FROM our next halting-place we turned to look again. And then our hearts seemed to stop in our breasts. At least mine did; and the open mouth and stertorous breathing of the chief, as he stared at his man, indicated that he was as appalled and fascinated as I was.

For Doyle was starting to climb his rope, hand over hand, toward the iron man's head.

Foot by foot he progressed, scaling the sheer cliff of the metal giant's back. With each forward sway, he stopped. Evidently in those seconds it was all he could do to hang on. In each backward leaning he hauled himself up a bit more. He got to within four feet of the base of the head, within which he innocently sup-

posed was a soulless bit of radio mechanism. Three feet. And still we couldn't divine what purpose was behind his daring.

And then the vast iron thing stopped, as though at last aware of the clinging, puny creature on its back. But it couldn't be aware of it! No nerves to feel. No ears to hear. Unless the scraping of Doyle's heavy shoes had carried through the metal to the brain in the case? But that was utterly improbable.

Nevertheless, the thing *did* know, suddenly, that something was on its back. And I believe I know now how that could be.

The eyes of the chief and myself, and of every soul within range, were focussed on Doyle. In every face must have been stamped the same agonizing tensity I felt on my own as I watched his perilous ascent up the moving metal cliff, with the ponderous arms swinging within inches of brushing him off at every step the monster took. The glaring eyeballs in the head, I think, noted that uniformity of gaze. The satanic intelligence behind them must have divined its cause.

Anyhow, the iron man paused, half turned, then began to back with regular, machine-like steps up over the broad sidewalk and straight toward the stone wall of the nearest building.

"Drop!" bellowed the chief, his face death-white. "Doyle—drop!"

But Doyle, it seemed, had no intention of dropping. He clung all the tighter, like a climber on a tree trunk in a gale of wind, while the iron man backed nearer and nearer to the fatal wall.

"Jump!" commanded the chief.

But again Doyle disobeyed; perhaps he could not hear. And deathly silence fell on those of us who watched—a silence broken only by the crash of the iron feet as they thudded on the sidewalk.

The picture will be etched on my brain till I die.

A street lamp gleamed from a pole near by. It flared into the vacant eye-holes on a level with them and only a few feet away. It showed in every detail the clanging metal monster backing toward the building wall to crush the man on its back, meanwhile throwing that gallant figure, struggling to keep its hold on the jerking rope, into deep shadow.

But Doyle was doing more than merely struggle to keep his grip. He was still inching higher.

A pendulum swing of the rope brought him a little to one side, and we saw that only a foot separated him now from the shallow flat terrace formed by the top of the body-cylinder around the smaller cylinder of the head.

Doyle's fingers caught the edge of the shallow terrace. He let go of the rope——

Crash!

The mountainous bulk had smashed against the wall. Stone chips flew from the grinding surface where Doyle had clung.

And Doyle? He was on the terrace of the "shoulders", clinging at last to the goal he had set himself. But his left foot was dangling at a sickening angle.

FOR an instant we saw him cling motionless. His face in the light of the street lamp was green. But he stuck, hugging the two-foot cylinder of a head as a lineman hugs a telegraph pole. And at last he began to move, inch by inch, to conclude the task he had so heroically begun.

Inch by inch he started to swarm around the cylinder toward the front of it. Again the great hulk of iron beneath him banged against the stone wall. The shock was terrific, but Doyle stayed.

His legs clamped more firmly around

the head, he drew himself squarely in front of the "face"—and thus at last had the bull's-eye so close that it couldn't possibly be missed.

He jerked his gun from its holster, leveled it into an eye-hole. . . .

A half-yell, such as even the agony of his crushed foot had not sufficed to wring from him, came from his pallid lips. And then he seemed to turn to stone. Of all the mob, I alone knew the reason.

What must have been his horror when his eyes, sighting into the cavernous head, saw the fiendish eyeballs glaring out of the glass case, returning stare for stare? No radio mechanism, but disembodied human eyes! For of course he must have seen them. The street-light the monster was facing surely shone in enough to reveal them.

Turned to stone! It is a hackneyed description, but it is the most exact I can think of to apply to the way he continued inactive, paralyzed in mid-course. And while he clung there, revolver leveled at the glass case in the iron man's head but with his nerveless finger refusing to pull the trigger, one of the great arms started to sweep slowly up toward him.

"Doyle . . . Doyle . . . Doyle," whispered the chief by my side. I believe he thought he was shouting it. "Doyle . . . look out . . . Doyle. . . ."

Not more than five seconds could have been required for the balanced weights in the iron torso to draw up that grim, claw-tipped arm. But it seemed like five hours. And throughout that time, when the night itself seemed to be holding its breath, Doyle hung still.

The arm curved in on itself. The gigantic pincers opened wide like the jaws of a steam shovel. They closed. . . .

There was a single shot as Doyle's muscles finally obeyed his frantic brain. Simultaneously with the shot a terrible scream came from his lips.

The ponderous arm straightened jerkily; stopped; moved convulsively again, for all the world like the limb of a wounded living creature. Then it hung still, as hangs the arm of a leaning derrick. And suspended in midair, writhing feebly in the clasp of the murderous pincers, was Doyle.

For a moment we could only stand and gape at the struggling figure hanging high over our heads. Then a dozen of us began fighting for the privilege of being the first to climb the trailing rope and rescue him.

We eased him out of the awful clutch —a thing made possible only by the fact that his shot had smashed the case and the brain a bare instant before the claws could clamp with their full force—and lowered him gently to the street.

"He'll live," said a doctor who had fought his way through the crowd to bend over the badly crushed man. "He'll spend the next few months in a plaster cast. But he'll live."

"And he'll get some nice, shiny medals for this, too," said the chief gruffly.

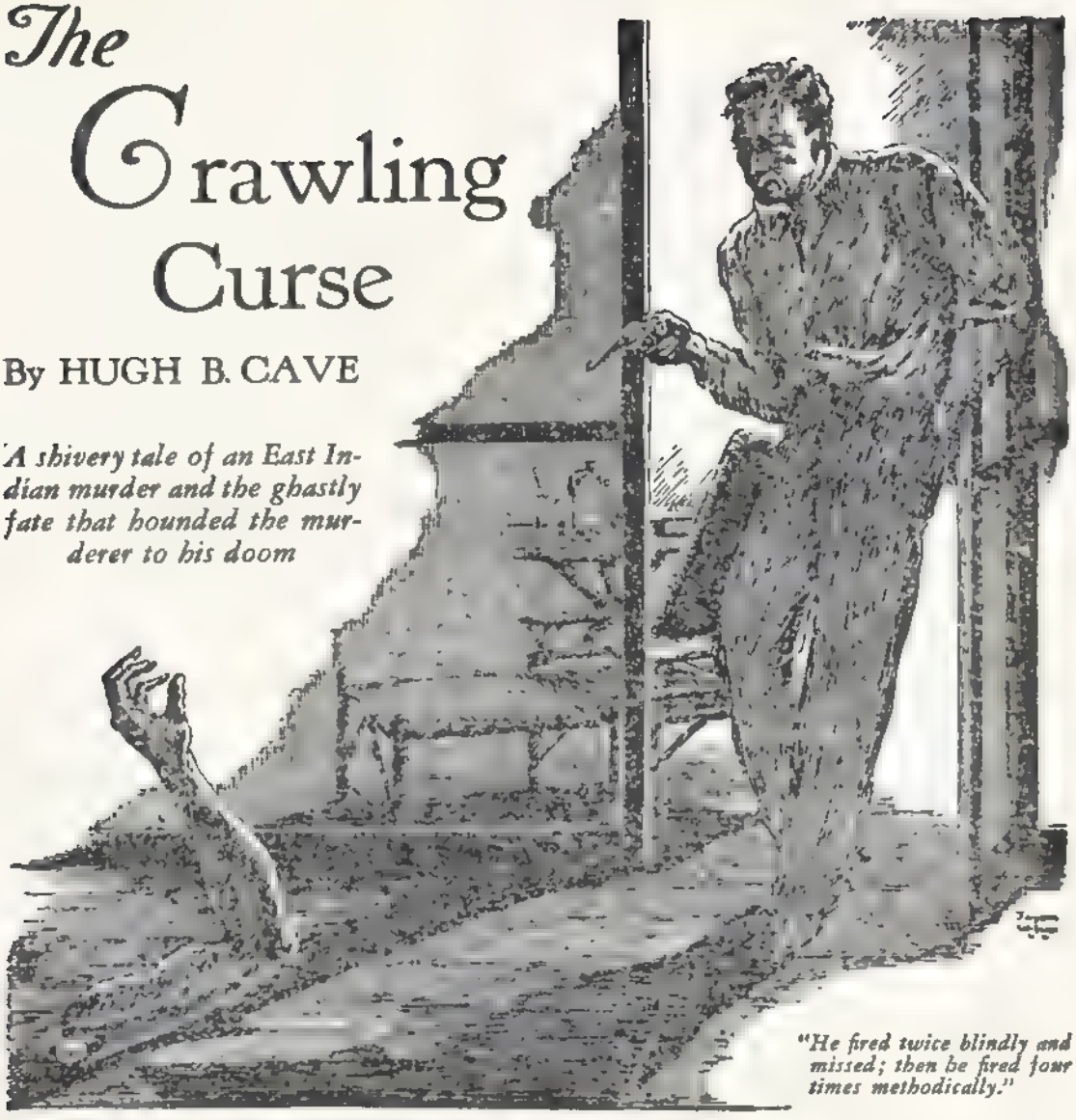
Doyle grinned weakly up at us. His lips moved. We bent to hear what he had to say. Some heroic statement that would ring down the years? "I only did my duty?" Something like that?

"Trade somebody the medals . . . for a cigarette," was what he whispered.

The Crawling Curse

By HUGH B. CAVE

A shivery tale of an East Indian murder and the ghastly fate that hounded the murderer to his doom



"He fired twice blindly and missed; then he fired four times methodically."

VESKER, the Dutchman, paced methodically down the second-floor corridor and entered the room numbered 213. It was the room of the man he meant to murder; and without emotion or nervousness or any feeling whatever, he hid himself there to await his victim's arrival.

The hour was eleven o'clock at night, and Vesker's victim would return at eleven-fifteen. His name was Tenegai LaRoque, and he was a good man. He was part French and part Saputan, which made him a half-caste in the eyes of certain white men and a king invincible in the eyes of certain up-river natives. Government officials had thought enough of him to overlook the fact that he was the illegitimate son of a Saputan sorceress, and remember that he was also the son of a distinguished French officer. Consequently he held a position of high importance in Bandjermasin.

At present he was playing bridge with his wife and his wife's friends. It was his wife's arrangement. His wife was

twenty-four and unforgivably lovely, and passionately French.

It was for her sake, as well as his own, that Vesker was hiding in Tenegai LaRoque's room. She and Vesker had planned the details together. Neither of them loved the man who was to be murdered.

The room was shadow-ridden and murky, and a very good place for Vesker's purpose. It was one of the best rooms in Bandjermasin's best hotel, which meant that it possessed two narrow windows and smelled a little and seldom saw light enough to dispel the lurking gloom. Tonight, as Vesker stood at the east window, the gloom was thick enough to be alive, and the view outside was one of black house-tops, twisted street-alleys, and occasional furtive eyes of ocher light.

Vesker stood and listened, and heard nothing; so he paced the room twice and then leaned against the wall with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He was not afraid of what he was going to do. It would be quite simple and silent, and no one would know. No one but God, Vesker thought; and God was too busy with big affairs to worry about mere details.

There would be questions, afterward, and perhaps an official investigation. But that meant nothing. Bandjermasin was full of officious persons who had nothing to do but investigate this and that, without learning anything.

It was eleven-fifteen. Vesker dropped his cigarette and stepped on it, and flattened his body against the wall behind the door. From his pocket he took a short length of lead piping, which was heavy and very solid. And he waited.

Presently he heard some one coming. The door opened, and a tall, stoop-shouldered shape stepped over the threshold. Vesker lifted the lead piping and brought it down again mightily. There was a crunch of bone, and a thin wheezing, and then the thump of a falling body.

Vesker stood over his victim and smiled thoughtfully. He put the weapon back into his pocket. Then he moved to the door, stepped out, listened intently, and came back again. He went to his knees and adjusted the limp body over his shoulder.

He closed the door of Tenegai LaRoque's room after him and carried Tenegai LaRoque to his own room, on the third floor. There he dropped his victim on the bed, and grinned, and breathed deeply with satisfaction.

No one would know.

LaRoque was dead. Vesker bent over him and listened for the sound of a beating heart, and heard nothing. He fumbled with the man's wrist and felt no pulse. So he went to a cupboard and took out four empty burlap bags, and dropped them on the floor. Then, from a bureau drawer, he took a large sheet of waterproof canvas and spread that over the carpet. He put the dead man on it.

While he was doing this, Tenegai LaRoque's wife came into the room.

She was undoubtedly beautiful, this woman. Her hair was black and her eyes were black, and a tropical sun had darkened her skin so that it stood out in startling contrast to the off-white of her evening gown. She was slender and not too tall, and the lines of her body were daringly revealed by the fit of her dress. She came and stood beside Vesker and looked down into the dead face of her husband.

"You are a brave man, Corlu," she smiled.

Vesker looked at her. He wanted this woman. From the very first night of their friendship, when he had met her at an exclusive social affair, he had wanted her.

"Any man can be brave," he said, "for sufficient reason."

"And I am sufficient?"

He took her in his arms and buried his lips in her black hair, and there was no need to answer.

"I love you, Renee," he said. But he did not love her; he wanted her. And he knew the difference. He held her against him until the perspiration of his arms left wet lines in her dress. Then he released her and said quietly:

"This will not be pretty. You had better go."

"You will come to me later?"

"As soon as it is finished."

She kissed him and touched the body of her husband with her foot. Then she laughed softly, and went out, and Vesker locked the door after her.

He knelt beside the dead man, then, and undressed him, leaving him stark naked on the canvas sheet. Looking at what he had done, he smiled and said almost inaudibly:

"Yes, it will not be pretty. But it will soon be over, my friend."

He went to the bed and raised the mattress, and took out a leather case which contained instruments. Then he went to the door again and made sure that it was locked. After that he loosened one of the bulbs in the chandelier above him, because the bright light seemed to threaten his solitude. And finally, with the case of instruments on the canvas beside him, he knelt again beside the dead man.

IT WOULD have been an all-night job had he not known how; but among other things he had studied medicine and knew the use of scalpel and hack-saw. And he had no personal feelings about the task. It was mechanical and did not frighten him.

He began with the dead man's leg, and at the first stroke of the knife the body twitched convulsively and the victim's lips parted to release a groaning monotone. Vesker stiffened and stared into the man's countenance. Then he listened again at the man's breast, and scowled. After that he worked very quickly.

He worked for an hour before he felt that he was not alone. The feeling grew upon him and annoyed him, so that he ceased his labor and rocked back on his knees. He had already removed both of his victim's legs and placed them to one side. The severed head and left arm lay with them on the canvas. Only the right arm remained, and it lay limp with its fingers slightly curled.

Vesker stared at it uneasily and told himself that the slow opening of the fingers was due to natural causes, and not to anything else. But a mist was forming over the fingers, or seemed to be, and it frightened him. The mist was like cigarette smoke, thin and gray and tenuous, and in motion. Was it taking form? No, of course it was not. That was only his silly imagination, and the lateness of the hour, and the unpleasantness of his task. And yet surely——

The mist *was* taking form. Vesker watched it and shrank away from it. It was a hand, now, like the hand of the dead man on the floor, except that these smoky fingers were malformed and exceedingly long. And they were descending slowly into the real hand. They were becoming a part of it.

The fingers of the dead man's hand opened, then, while Vesker watched them. The index finger pointed into his face accusingly, as if that other hand had given it the power of life. But of course it was not that; it was merely a mechanical reflex action caused by the severing of certain cords. Vesker laughed throatily.

He stopped laughing and held his

breath. Over the victim's torso a second mist was forming, and the mist was becoming a face. Yes, it was a face, a woman's face. How could there be a woman's face like that? Was it his imagination? No, because he was thinking of LaRoque's wife, and this woman was not LaRoque's wife.

It was almost no face at all, but what there was of it was vicious and sinister. The eyes were slanted and the cheekbones were high and the lips were full. The woman was a native, and very old. She was——

But that was foolish! There was no woman here at all. He was making her up in his mind and his inner consciousness was projecting an image of her. That was idiocy.

"There is nothing here," Vesker said aloud.

The woman's lips parted in a smile and seemed to form words to answer him. Vesker cursed and leaned forward and swept his arm through her. And then he laughed, because she was not there. She had never been there.

The hand of the dead man had shifted position on the canvas, and the index finger was still pointing at him. But that was only reflex action.

"I would make a poor professional," Vesker said, smiling. "My nerves are whisky-soaked."

He finished his task and put his instruments back into the case. Then he filled three of the burlap bags with portions of the dead man's body, and into the fourth bag he thrust the bloody canvas and the leather case. He wiped his hands on a towel and put the towel in his pocket. Then he unlocked the door and looked out.

The lights had been turned off in the corridor. Vesker took two of the burlap bags with him and went out, and locked the door after him. He carried the bags down the back stairs, and a car was standing in the side street. The street was deserted, and the car was his own. He placed the bags in the rear compartment.

He returned to his room, then, and made sure that every trace of evidence had been removed before he took the other two bags down to the car. Then he sat behind the wheel and drove.

He drove to the east end of the waterfront and dropped one of the four bags into the sea, after weighting it with heavy stones. He drove farther and dropped the second bag from the end of an abandoned dock. The third bag and the fourth he took with him in a rowboat and transported far out into the bay.

Then he returned to the hotel and went straight to Renee LaRoque's room and let himself in with his own key. And the dead man's wife was waiting for him.

2

FOUR days later, when he first saw it, he was living in a private home in the European quarter with Tenegai LaRoque's wife. And he laughed, because he thought that the favorite cat of his mistress had eaten too much and was having cramps.

He had forgotten about Tenegai LaRoque. Four days had passed and there had been an investigation. Government officials had questioned the hotel authorities aimlessly and foolishly, because LaRoque had disappeared. Where had LaRoque gone? No one knew. Perhaps he had tired of the heat and monotony of Bandjermasin and taken silent leave of absence to Singapore. Other men had done that. He would come back.

So they had stopped asking questions and they were now wondering what LaRoque would say when he returned and

found his wife living with Corlu Vesker. Presently they would find something else to wonder about, and they would forget the whole affair. There would be a native uprising, or a Chinese merchant found stabbed, or something else to take its place.

So Vesker laughed when he first saw it, because he had nothing to worry about.

He was alone on the veranda, in the mosquito room. It was night, and a lamp burned on the table, and the wire netting was alive with droning insects. The glow of the lamp reached feebly out over the lawn and illuminated the veranda steps.

Vesker saw the thing on the steps. Then he saw what it was, and he recoiled so abruptly that he knocked the swizzle-stick out of the tall glass on the table beside him. For the thing was not a cat, but a human arm with a hand and five fingers, and it was sliding across the veranda floor toward him.

He stood up and drew a deep breath and walked toward it, because he did not believe what he saw. But he did not open the door of the mosquito room. He stood with his face pressed against the screen, staring silently. Then he shouted wildly:

"Renee! In the name of God, come quick!"

The thing was ten feet away and approaching like a large caterpillar, humping itself in the center and clawing forward with its five groping fingers. Vesker stood quite still and watched it. His eyes were wide and his face pale, and he was afraid.

"Renee!" he shouted. "Renee! Come out here!"

Then he took a small pearl-handled revolver from the bulging pocket of his linen coat, and flung the screen door open. He fired twice blindly and missed, and then he fired four times methodically. The thing ceased its forward motion and reared like a swaying snake, with its five fingers opening and closing in the air. It fell backward with the impact of the last bullet. Then it wriggled away with incredible speed, while Vesker clung to the door and gaped at it.

In a moment Renee LaRoque came and stared at Vesker and said shrilly:

"What is it? What were you shooting at?"

Vesker looked down at the revolver in his hand, and looked at the veranda floor, and shook his head heavily.

"I must be drunk," he said.

But he knew better.

3

VESKER wrote a letter.

It was the evening of the seventh day, and the lamp on the table threw his big shadow grotesquely over the paper. He was alone in the room and he was afraid, and his letter was both a confession and a lie.

"I killed him, and there was a good reason for doing so. You knew him, Fournier, so you will understand."

Fournier—Captain Jason Fournier—was in charge of the native police squad which patrolled the evil quarter of Bandjermasin's waterfront.

"He was a half-caste and a rotter, and he deserved to die, but I should not have interfered except that he was dragging his wife's good name in the dust. He was playing with another woman and the authorities suspected it. For Renee's sake I had to stop it.

"That night I went to his room at the hotel and argued with him. He was drunk, Fournier. You have seen him drunk, and you know how utterly uncontrollable he can become. He attacked me and I struck him, and when I bent over him he was dead.

"Why am I telling you this? Because I know it will go no further. We are friends. And I need your help. A terrible thing has happened, and I am going mad thinking of it. Four days after I had hidden his body, a horrible beast tried to get into the mosquito room to kill me. It was his hand, Fournier. As God is my witness, it was his hand and arm. *His!* I shot it, and it went away, but last night it came again and tried to get into my window.

"That was about two o'clock in the morning. I heard a scratching sound, like rats, and I sat up in bed and switched on a flashlight. The window was shut, Fournier. I always sleep with my windows shut, thank God. And the thing was coiled on the sill, with its five fingers flattened against the glass. It had forced the screen up, but the window was locked. It was awful! You will laugh at me, thinking I am drunk, but I am not drunk and I was not drunk last night when the thing came. What I saw was real.

"I screamed, Fournier, and rushed to the bureau for my revolver. But the thing has a brain, because when I turned again to shoot it, it was not there. Renee came running into the room—she is my guest, you know, for the time being, until she gets over the shock of her husband's infidelity—and she asked me what was wrong. I told her. She said I was mad. But I am not mad, Fournier. I was never more sane or sober in my life. And it was LaRoque's hand, his arm and fingers, trying to kill me.

"You must help me. I can not go to the police. The police would not know what to do, anyway. This is a terrible thing and driving me crazy. I am afraid, because LaRoque was not a white man but a half-caste, and part Saputan. They say his mother was a sorceress.

"What shall I do, Fournier? You have studied these things and know more than I. What shall I do?"

Vesker read what he had written. It did not give him courage; it frightened him more. Putting his beliefs on paper made him sure of them. He heard footsteps in the corridor outside his door, and he turned in his chair like a scared animal.

"Who is there?" he said harshly.

The knob turned and the door opened, and Renee LaRoque stood there. She wore yellow pajamas which were deep orange in the lamplight, and she had let her hair down so that it covered her shoulders and accentuated the white smoothness of her breasts. Vesker pushed his letter aside and stood up to meet her.

"Are you coming to me tonight?" she said softly.

"Yes."

"I'm tired of waiting, Corlu."

He held her passionately and kissed her until her eyes were wide with anticipation. Then he walked with her to the door.

"I will come in a moment," he promised. "I must finish a letter."

"To a woman?" she said quickly.

"There is no other woman. You know that."

She leaned in the doorway and pushed her hair back with smooth, slender fingers. Vesker lifted his hands and stepped close to her, and then stepped back again, laughing softly.

"As soon as I have finished the letter," he promised. And he closed the door after her.

He went to the table and began to read the letter over again, but it frightened him. He sealed it quickly, addressed the envelope, then turned the lamp low.

THE corridor was dark, and Renee LaRoque's room was at the other end. He tiptoed along, smiling and rubbing his

hands together softly. He was quite contented. Desire was greater now than fear, and in a moment he would forget about Tenegai LaRoque and about the creeping beast with five fingers.

He removed his necktie and carried it in his hand, and began to unbutton his shirt, because he was impatient. He was fumbling with the fourth button when he heard the scream.

He stopped abruptly. The scream was human, and came from the rear of the house where the servants' quarters were located. It was a vibrant shriek, full of terror.

Vesker stood quite still, waiting for it to come again, and after the scream he heard some one talking in a loud, frightened voice. Then he hurried down the corridor, and he was running when he reached the source of the sound.

It was the room of the Malay houseboy, Melgani. There was a light burning on the wash-stand, and the little brown-skinned native was kneeling foolishly on the carpet, with his bare arms uplifted and his face turned to the ceiling. From his lips poured a torrent of incoherent syllables which were prayers.

Vesker stood over him and frowned and shook him. The boy flung both arms around him and sobbed.

"What is it?" Vesker said sullenly.

The Malay muttered in his own tongue, pointing to the window. The window was half-way open and the screen was up. The white cotton curtains were moving indolently in the breeze.

"What is it?" Vesker said again. "Talk English, damn you!"

"Dem snake, *Tuan!*" the Malay whined. "Dem snake him come t'rough window affer me!"

"What snake?"

"Dem big white-color snake him hab twitchy head!"

Vesker stiffened and looked about the room fearfully. He said: "Where is it?"

"Him come 'cross floor! Him try climb on bed! Me yell, *Tuan!*"

"Where is it, I asked you!"

The Malay gazed about, too, and shook his head from side to side.

"Me—me not know, *Tuan.*"

And there was no snake. Vesker looked; Melgani looked. Holding the lamp, Vesker went to his knees and searched the floor, the corners, the bed-shadows. Rising, he searched the window-ledge, the wash-stand, the cupboard. There was no snake.

"Did you leave your window open?" Vesker demanded.

"No, no, *Tuan!* No!"

"Well, it's not here. It's gone again. Go back to bed."

Then he went out and walked slowly down the corridor to Renee LaRoque's room. But he was afraid again and he struck four matches, one after another, to light the way. And his hand trembled when he opened the door.

HE THOUGHT at first that Renee LaRoque was lying that way for his benefit, because she was lovely and passionate and because she wanted him. She lay across the bed, limp and relaxed and nearly naked, with her hair dangling and her white throat exposed.

But when he had shut the door and tiptoed toward her, he saw something else.

She was not lying there for him. She had been flung there. Her lips were blue and parted, and her tongue protruded. Her throat was blotched with crimson. Her yellow pajamas were not open because *she* had opened them, but because they had been torn open!

Vesker could not believe it. He still expected something else. So he sat beside her and caressed her body with his

big hands, and not until she failed to respond to his caresses did he realize that she was dead.

Then he moved away from her and stared at her, and licked his lips. He could not understand it. He still wanted her. She was limp and exquisite and warm, and yet she was dead. How could that be?

He leaned forward again to touch her, but terror took hold of him instead. He leaped to his feet and paced the room, turning always to look at her. The lamp was burning on the dressing-table, and its pink silk shade made a bloody glow of the light. Beyond that the window was open. Renee had never slept with her window open!

The hand had killed her! The hand which had gone to the Malay's room, first, by mistake! God in heaven!

Vesker stared at her and felt cold blood climbing through his legs into his body. He could not take his eyes from her, but he did not want her now; he was afraid of her. She was no longer lovely; she was something dead and cold and horrible. But he was afraid to leave her.

He stood and stared, until he saw another face in the room. It was the same face he had seen on the night of the murder. It was the old native woman, nameless and strange, hovering over the body of Tenegai LaRoque's wife, and smiling—smiling triumphantly, as if she were proud of something.

Vesker said thickly: "Who—who are you?"

The woman looked at him. She was only the face of a woman. She did not answer.

"What do you want?" Vesker moaned.

But she was not there any more. There was only the strangled body of Renee LaRoque, and the lamp with the red silk shade, and the open window.

And fear. The fear was a living thing that seeped into Vesker's brain, undermining his reason. He rushed to the bed and glared into the space where the woman's face had hung. He beat at the space with his fists. He muttered, and said meaningless things aloud. He screamed hysterically.

Then he sank to his knees and buried his face in Renee LaRoque's breast, and sobbed with terror.

4

HE DID not mail the letter to Captain Jason Fournier. When he left Renee LaRoque and returned to his own room, the letter was not where he had put it. He found it on the floor, torn into very small pieces.

He looked at the pieces a long time before he could find courage enough to pick them up. And then he burned them. He was afraid of them.

"It is a good thing," he said. "If I had mailed the letter, there would have been trouble. If they ever learn that Tenegai LaRoque's wife is dead, they will hang me."

He would have to hide the body. Pacing his room, back and forth for an hour, he thought of possible hiding-places. It was a quarter after three o'clock, his watch said. He would have to complete the task before daylight, or the native servants would know.

He went back to Renee LaRoque's room and rolled the body in the top blanket of the bed. That was considerate, he thought. The blanket was soft and woolly and would not irritate. Then he put the bundle over his shoulder and carried it upstairs to the top floor of the house, and up a final flight of wooden steps to the attic. It was very dark up here, and the only light was the probing eye of his flashlight.

He carried the body to the very end of the attic floor and laid it there. Then he held the flashlight in his hand and pointed its circular glare above him, to where three large cross-beams supported the sloping roof. One of those cross-beams was not a beam at all, but a hollow long-box containing seven thin water-pipes. He had opened it the first day, to repair one of the pipes, because the Malay servants did not know how.

He found a ladder and adjusted it carefully, and carried the blanket-wrapped body to the top of it. Resting his burden on the first and second beams, he sat a-straddle the third and pried the boards loose with his fingers. The seven pipes were of lead, and he bent them to enlarge the space. Then he stood on the beams and lowered the dead woman into the opening, and replaced the boards.

"They will never know," he said.

And he returned to his own room.

5

Two evenings later he had dinner at the Karnery Club, and one of his friends said slyly:

"So you're keeping bachelor quarters again, Vesker. Eh?"

Vesker said: "They never stay long, these lovely ladies."

It was a very special occasion. A brilliant young government chap was being married tomorrow and having his last fling tonight. Exclusively stag. Imported whisky, wine for those who preferred it, and sufficient of both to make a regiment drunk. The doors of the Karnery Club were closed and locked to strangers. Every man of importance was present.

Vesker had come by invitation. They were sorry for him. They thought Renee LaRoque had walked out on him and taken the customary "silent leave." Most of Vesker's women had done that eventually.

"I suppose you'll be moving back to the shack, Vesker."

The "shack" was the small residential hotel exclusively reserved for government bachelors.

"Temporarily," Vesker smiled.

"Until romance wings through the window again, eh?"

"There are many fish in the water," Vesker shrugged. "Of course"—and he raised his eyebrows suggestively — "I loved her."

Ordinarily he would have been angry at their persistence, but tonight he did not mind. If they thought she had left him of her own accord, let them think so!

He spoke of it whenever the opportunity occurred. That was the best thing to do—make light of it. Left him? Of course, of course! Perhaps she had received a message from her husband, and had skipped off to him. These women!

"You've had pretty good luck with them, Vesker. More than most of us."

"Ye-e-es."

"Ever really been in love?"

"Always," Vesker grinned.

He wanted to ask certain questions. Captain Jason Fournier was here, and, as a pleasant surprize, Lord Willoughby of the British North. Willoughby knew Borneo forward and backward. He had made a special study of Dyak lore, and knew every inch of the Merasi, the Upper Barito, the black-water country, the inland—everywhere. Willoughby had spent years among the Ibans, the Penihings, the Long-Glits, the Saputans.

But Willoughby was a hard man to talk to. You had to lead the conversation to him. And how could you switch it from women to natives?

"I have one rival," Vesker said, feeling

his way along. "Heard recently about an up-river *kapala* who married fourteen women at the same time."

"Eh?"

"Probably a huge lie. The Dyaks don't do that, do they, Willoughby?"

Willoughby sucked the end of his pipe and uncrossed his legs. "It's possible," he said. "What tribe was it?"

"Damned if I know. The fellow was a Saputan, I think."

"Hard to believe, then, unless the chap was a *blian*."

One of the younger men frowned and said: "What?"

"A *blian*. Witch-doctor. Sorcerer. They have things pretty much their own way. If one of them wanted fourteen women, he'd take 'em."

"It's a queer thing, that," Vesker said. "The power they're supposed to have over the people, I mean. Absolute tommyrot, of course."

"Is it?"

"Eh?"

"You're a white man," Willoughby shrugged. "Being a white man, you can't see beyond the end of your all-important nose."

"You mean to say it's *not* tommyrot?"

"I do, emphatically!"

"I heard a tall yarn once," Vesker said hesitantly, "about a chap who murdered one of those fellows. Rather, a relative of one." Now he would have an answer to his questions! Willoughby would know and tell the honest truth. But how to ask him? How to put the case clearly, without overstepping the bounds of discretion?

"After murdering the native," he said slowly, "this chap cut the body up and buried it. And then, one night——"

One of the listeners rose, with a dry smile, and turned out two of the three electric lamps. The third lamp was behind Willoughby's chair, and Willoughby was leaning slightly forward with his face in the amber glare of it. The rest of the room was in shadow, made furtive and restless and sinister by Vesker's words.

"One night a horrible snake-like thing crawled into the murderer's room, for vengeance. It was the murdered man's arm, with five twisted fingers on the end of it!"

"And did it kill him?" Willoughby asked quietly.

"I don't——" Vesker hesitated. He was going to say "I don't know," but then he would have to answer questions. And he wanted some one else to answer the questions. So he said bluntly: "Yes, it killed him."

Willoughby nodded, and the others watched him, waiting for his comment. He looked at them indifferently and said: "Well, what of it?"

"But such a thing isn't possible!" Vesker said.

"Why isn't it?"

"Why *isn't* it? Great Scott, man, a dead man's arm can't crawl out of its grave and——"

"Why not?"

"Well, how can it?"

Willoughby reached out and scratched a match on the cover of a book which lay on the table. He held the flame to the bowl of his pipe and stared at Vesker while he sucked the pipe-stem.

"With white men," he said, "it might be rare. Few whites know the secrets of necromancy. But you say the murdered man came of a sorcerer's family. A brother, was he?"

"I—I believe it was father and son," Vesker faltered. "Or mother and son."

"Well then, the father knew of his son's death, and the whys of it. So he raised the dead. You say the body was

dismembered. He raised enough of it to return the murderer's compliment."

"You absolutely believe in necromancy, Willoughby?" a listener protested.

"Absolutely."

"Seen it work?"

"A hundred times, in Saputan *kampongs*."

"You should have some good stories, old chap."

Willoughby smiled. He had a reputation for his good stories. They were not bedtime tales, either. They filled his listeners with nocturnal dread and very real shudders. But men like that sort of thing.

"I'll tell you one," Willoughby said. "It's not pleasant."

Creaking rockers filled the room with suggestive sound as the men drew closer. A door opened and closed, and a newcomer said: "What the devil!" Jason Fournier silenced him with a curt word and made room for him. There was no other sound after that, except the breathing of many men and the bubbling noise of Willoughby's pipe. The lamplight was yellow and feeble.

"IT HAPPENED in Ola-Baong, on the Upper Barito," Willoughby said. "The village *blian* was a wicked old Saputan named Merningi. He had a particular grudge against a chap who had run off with his favorite woman."

Vesker stared. Behind Willoughby's chair a mist was forming. It was cigarette smoke, of course—or pipe smoke. But why was it taking that particular shape? Why, in the name of God, was it becoming a woman's face?

"The Saputans, you know," Willoughby said, "have a particularly gruesome form of necromancy which leads a man to horrible death. They dress a corpse in the clothes of the intended victim and hide it away in the jungle, to rot. As the corpse decays, so does the victim. I've known men to go stark mad looking for the hiding-place, to avoid such a death."

Vesker's fingers were white and bony on the arm of his chair. The shape behind Willoughby's head was fully materialized now, and hideously clear. It was the same shape, the same face—the same sinister old woman! Great God, was he the only one who could see it? Were the others all blind?

"Merningi, the *blian*," Willoughby said, "obtained the body of an old woman who had died of beri-beri, and dressed it in the clothes of his intended victim. Then he toted it into the jungle and secreted it there."

But Willoughby was not saying that! Willoughby was no longer there! His face was the woman's face, with boring black eyes and withered lips. And his body was the body of a nearly naked Saputan woman, clad in dirty gray sarong and grass sandals! In God's name, could the others not see it?

"The next day the victim took sick. There was no reason for it; he simply became ill. He didn't know what Merningi had done, you see; so he couldn't help himself. Had he known, he might have found the body and ripped his clothes off it in time to break the connection. But he became violently ill the second day, and on the fourth day he began to rot."

Vesker was unable to cry out. He cursed himself for being an idiot. There was no woman there! How under heaven could any woman be sitting there when Willoughby was occupying the chair? He closed his eyes and opened them again, and the woman was looking straight at him, smiling significantly.

"The fellow died. He simply rotted away until the life was gone out of his

body. I was with him when he gave up the ghost."

There was silence. Vesker leaped to his feet and cried harshly: "Stop it! Good God, stop it!"

Then one of the younger men turned on the lights and Willoughby, sitting in the chair, said with a dry smile:

"You asked for it, old man. Have a drink."

And the native woman was not there.

6

VESKER sat up in bed and stared fearfully at the thing on the floor.

He had come home late from the club, and he had been drinking heavily. His lips were thick and sour. His sight was blurred. His stomach ached.

But before going to bed, he had packed all of his clothes and possessions into two big suit-cases, and this was his last night in the accursed house which harbored Renee La Roque's dead body. A tramp freighter, leaving Bandjermasin in the morning, would take him to Kuching.

Climbing into bed, he had removed his clothes and tossed them on a chair. And now they were on the floor.

They were on the floor, and something was dragging them!

Vesker sat and stared. He was dreaming, of course. The whole horrible affair, from beginning to end, had been the product of his own imagination. How could a dead man's arm have life? How could it crawl along, like a snake, and drag a handful of clothes in its curled fingers? That was madness. He was drunk.

Besides, he had locked his door carefully and turned the latch on the window. He looked at the window now, and it was shut tight. Faint moonlight glowed through it, illuminating the room. But the door was open, and the key was lying on the carpet!

Vesker screamed.

"I didn't mean to do it!" he shrieked. "I didn't mean to!"

The hideous thing paid no attention to him. It continued to crawl backward, pulling the clothes after it. How in the name of God had it gained admission? Had it clawed its way up the door and turned the lock with its fiendish fingers, after poking the key loose? Was there nothing it could *not* do?

But it was taking his clothes. What for? What good were his clothes? Did it think to imprison him in his room? Was it as foolish as that?

Vesker watched it. It slithered backward over the threshold, into the corridor. It turned to the right. Then it was gone.

Vesker leaped from the bed and slammed the door shut. He had other clothes; they were in one of the two suit-cases! At the club he could find a room for the rest of the night, and in the morning he would be far away from dead bodies and crawling hands, and faces that came from nowhere to leer at him.

Faces! He was on his knees, fumbling with the suit-case, and he remembered. He stood up, pawing his naked chest, stood with his eyes wide and his legs stiff as wood, huge and grotesque in loose-fitting pajamas. From his lips came a thick, bubbling sound.

He turned and ran to the door, and opened it. There he stopped, because the darkness of the corridor terrified him. He groped back again and sat on the bed, clawing with his fingers until the bed-clothes were wrinkled and sweat-stained.

"Had he known, he might have found the body and ripped his clothes off it in time to break the connection. But he be-

came violently ill the second day, and on the fourth day he began to rot."

Willoughby had said that. No, no, the woman had said it! Almighty God, the thing had taken his clothes! If he did not get them back——

He rushed to the open suit-case and pushed his hands deep into it, searching for a flashlight. Gaining his feet, he stood swaying. Where had the horrible creature taken his clothes? What dead body——

"Oh God, no!" he sobbed. "Not *her!* Not up there!"

But there was no other dead body. The thing had to have a dead body. Up there in the attic, in awful darkness, *she* was lying. Up there where he had put her, in the wooden casing which covered the water-pipes.

He ran to the door, and the glaring eye of the flashlight preceded him crazily as he groped into the corridor. The long corridor was full of moving shapes and suggestive sounds. It loomed over him and under him, clutching at him as he paced down it. He stopped twice and looked behind him. Merciful God, why had he hidden the body up there?

He gripped the railing with his left hand and held the flashlight rigid before him as he climbed the staircase. The light only made the surrounding darkness more hideous. Below him, when he was half-way up, a well of frightful gloom lay waiting. Above him was the sing-song of the wind outside the house, and the creak of wooden floors inside.

On the upper landing he found one of his socks. The hand had dropped it.

HE CLIMBED the final flight of wooden steps, counting them subconsciously as he went. Seven of them. Seven terrible ascents into a vault of horror. His slippers thumped thunderously. The hammering of his heart was even louder.

He could hear his breath whine in and out, and at the top of the seven steps he stopped to push the wet hair out of his eyes. The flashlight made a ghastly yellow-ringed glare over the floor. Then he began the march of torment to the far end of the chamber.

And then the face came.

It was the woman's face, and it hung before him in the light, like a shadow. Its eyes drilled into him, and a triumphant leer curled its thin lips. But it made no attempt to stop him; it hung always before him as he stumbled forward.

With one hand he lifted the ladder into place, because he feared to put down the flashlight. Above him hung the three black cross-beams. And the face sat on every rung, always before him, as he ascended.

He stood swaying on the beams, high above the floor. The ceiling sloped over his head. Once, when he lost his balance and clutched wildly to steady himself, the flashlight threw a crazy figure 8 over ceiling, floor, and wall. And the face was always within it.

Trembling in every muscle, he lowered himself slowly and straddled the coffin which contained Renee LaRoque's body. He placed the flashlight between his legs, so that his hands were leprously white in the gleam of it as he leaned forward to loosen the boards. And on the other end of the beam, where the glare was pale, the face sat and watched him.

The boards came loose in his fingers. He dropped them and shuddered violently as they clattered to the floor beneath his perched body. One after another he let them fall. Then he stared at the thing in the coffin.

The face of Tenegai LaRoque's wife stared back at him, silent in death. His

own clothes covered her body. Her yellow pajamas and the soft blanket lay neatly folded under her feet. And on the other end of the beam, the old woman was still watching him.

He clawed madly, raking his fingers in dead flesh and tearing his clothes loose from it. His own breathing was louder than the sound of his exertions. The flashlight made his task hideous and terrible, until the dead woman lay naked under his outstretched hands.

Then he leaned back, with madness in his eyes. He held the clothes in the crook of his arm and stood erect on the beam, rocking from side to side. He glared at the face of the native woman and laughed at it, and the laugh was a jangling cackle.

"You won't kill me!" he screamed. "I know who you are! You're LaRoque's mother! You're the sorceress! But you won't kill me! I'm too strong for you!"

The face sat on the end of the beam and smiled triumphantly. It did not answer him. When he turned the flashlight and walked along the beam to the top of the ladder, it did not follow him.

He put one foot on the ladder and started down. His left hand pressed the crumpled death-clothes against his body. His right hand held the light and clung to the wooden rungs as he descended.

He reached the floor and stood swaying, and looked up triumphantly.

"You won't get me!" he shouted.

And then he stiffened. Above him, on the black end of the third beam, something stirred. Vesker's lips writhed open to release a scream of terror. He flung himself backward.

He fell, and the flashlight clattered from his hand. His scream died to a whimpering moan. On hands and knees he clawed for the light, blindly, with his horrified gaze riveted on the thing above him. Then his twisted body became rigid, and he screeched wildly.

"No! No! Don't touch me! Don't——"

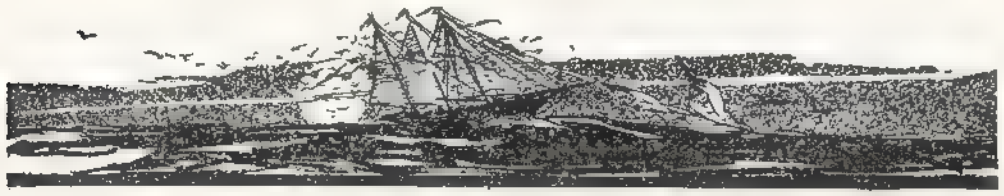
Above him, on the cross-beam, the thing slowly coiled.

"Don't touch me!" Vesker gibbered. "Don't—oh God, don't!"

The thing shot out and down with the speed of a leaping snake. It struck with vicious strength. A white, cold arm encircled Vesker's neck. Five twisted fingers buried themselves in the flesh of his throat.

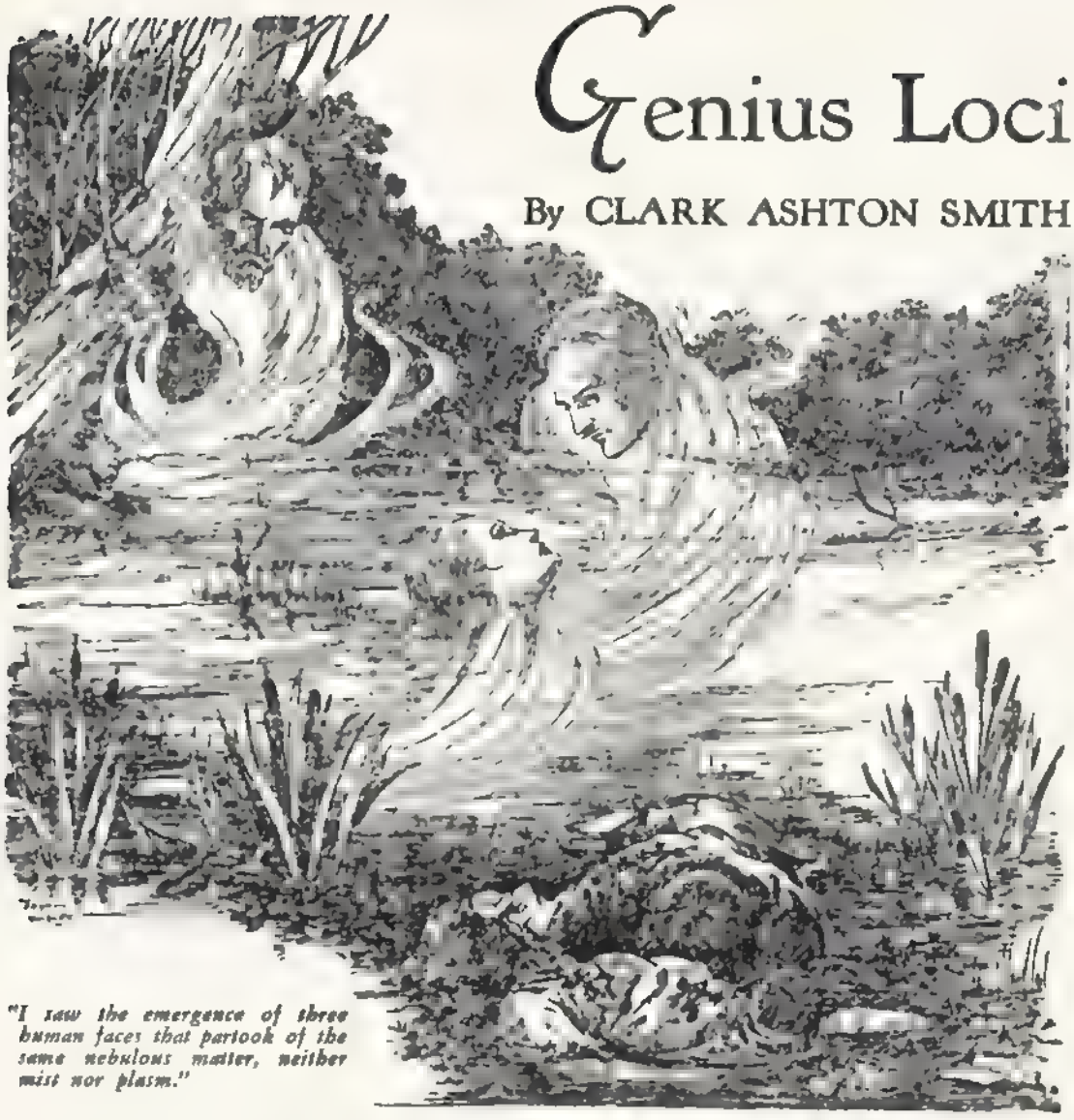
Vesker's screech died to a gurgle. Wildly he staggered to his feet, clawing with both hands at the living-dead fingers which strangled him. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead. His eyes opened to hideous bigness and became white, glaring crescents. His breath choked in his throat. His face purpled.

He stumbled toward the exit, blindly. But he did not reach it. His legs went limp beneath him and he sagged to the floor. And the five living-dead fingers finished their task.



Genius Loci

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH



"I saw the emergence of three human faces that partook of the same nebulous matter, neither mist nor plasm."

The story of a deathly horror that lurked in the scummy pond in the meadow where old Chapman had been found dead

"IT IS a very strange place," said Amberville, "but I scarcely know how to convey the impression it made upon me. It will all sound so simple and ordinary. There is nothing but a sedgy meadow, surrounded on three sides by slopes of yellow pine. A dreary little stream flows in from the open end, to lose itself in a *cul-de-sac* of cat-tails and boggy ground. The stream, running slowly and more slowly, forms a stagnant pool of some extent, from which several sickly-looking alders seem to fling themselves backward, as if unwilling to approach it. A dead willow leans above the pool, tangling its wan, skeleton-like reflection with the green scum that mottles the water. There are no blackbirds, no killdees, no dragon-flies even, such as one usually finds in a place of that sort.

It is all silent and desolate. The spot is evil—it is unholy in a way that I simply can't describe. I was compelled to make a drawing of it, almost against my will, since anything so macabre is hardly in my line. In fact, I made two drawings. I'll show them to you, if you like."

Since I had a high opinion of Amberville's artistic abilities, and had long considered him one of the foremost landscape painters of his generation, I was naturally eager to see the drawings. He, however, did not even pause to await my avowal of interest, but began at once to open his portfolio. His facial expression, the very movements of his hands, were somehow eloquent of a strange mixture of compulsion and repugnance as he brought out and displayed the two water-color sketches he had mentioned.

I could not recognize the scene depicted from either of them. Plainly it was one that I had missed in my desultory rambling about the foot-hill environs of the tiny hamlet of Bowman, where, two years before, I had purchased an uncultivated ranch and had retired for the privacy so essential to prolonged literary effort. Francis Amberville, in the one fortnight of his visit, through his flair for the pictorial potentialities of landscape, had doubtless grown more familiar with the neighborhood than I. It had been his habit to roam about in the forenoon, armed with sketching-materials; and in this way he had already found the theme of more than one lovely painting. The arrangement was mutually convenient, since I, in his absence, was wont to apply myself assiduously to an antique Remington typewriter.

I examined the drawings attentively. Both, though of hurried execution, were highly meritorious, and showed the characteristic grace and vigor of Amberville's style. And yet, even at first glance, I found a quality that was more than alien to the spirit of his work. The elements of the scene were those he had described. In one picture, the pool was half hidden by a fringe of mace-reeds, and the dead willow was leaning across it at a prone, despondent angle, as if mysteriously arrested in its fall toward the stagnant waters. Beyond, the alders seemed to strain away from the pool, exposing their knotted roots as if in eternal effort. In the other drawing, the pool formed the main portion of the foreground, with the skeleton tree looming drearily at one side. At the water's farther end, the cat-tails seemed to wave and whisper among themselves in a dying wind; and the steeply barring slope of pine at the meadow's terminus was indicated as a wall of gloomy green that closed in the picture, leaving only a pale margin of autumnal sky at the top.

All this, as the painter had said, was ordinary enough. But I was impressed immediately by a profound horror that lurked in these simple elements and was expressed by them as if by the balefully contorted features of some demoniac face. In both drawings, this sinister character was equally evident, as if the same face had been shown in profile and front view. I could not trace the separate details that composed the impression; but ever, as I looked, the abomination of a strange evil, a spirit of despair, malignity, desolation, leered from the drawing more openly and hatefully. The spot seemed to wear a macabre and Satanic grimace. One felt that it might speak aloud, might utter the imprecations of some gigantic devil, or the raucous derision of a thousand birds of ill omen. The evil conveyed was something wholly outside of humanity—more ancient than man. Somehow—fantastic as this will seem—the meadow had the air of a vampire, grown old and hideous with unutterable infamies. Subtly, indefinably, it

thirsted for other things than the sluggish trickle of water by which it was fed.

"WHERE is the place?" I asked, after a minute or two of silent inspection. It was incredible that anything of the sort could really exist—and equally incredible that a nature so robust as Amberville should have been sensitive to its quality.

"It's in the bottom of that abandoned ranch, a mile or less down the little road toward Bear River," he replied. "You must know it. There's a small orchard about the house, on the upper hillside; but the lower portion, ending in that meadow, is all wild land."

I began to visualize the vicinity in question. "Guess it must be the old Chapman place," I decided. "No other ranch along that road would answer your specifications."

"Well, whoever it belongs to, that meadow is the most horrible spot I have ever encountered. I've known other landscapes that had something wrong with them, but never anything like this."

"Maybe it's haunted," I said, half in jest. "From your description, it must be the very meadow where old Chapman was found dead one morning by his youngest daughter. It happened a few months after I moved here. He was supposed to have died of heart failure. His body was quite cold, and he had probably been lying there all night, since the family had missed him at supper-time. I don't remember him very clearly, but I remember that he had a reputation for eccentricity. For some time before his death, people thought he was going mad. I forget the details. Anyway, his wife and children left, not long after he died, and no one has occupied the house or cultivated the orchard since. It was a commonplace rural tragedy."

"I'm not much of a believer in spooks," observed Amberville, who seemed to have taken my suggestion of haunting in a literal sense. "Whatever the influence is, it's hardly of human origin. Come to think of it, though, I received a very silly impression once or twice—the idea that some one was watching me while I did those drawings. Queer—I had almost forgotten that, till you brought up the possibility of haunting. I seemed to see him out of the tail of my eye, just beyond the radius that I was putting into the picture: a dilapidated old scoundrel with dirty gray whiskers and an evil scowl. It's odd, too, that I should have gotten such a definite conception of him, without ever seeing him squarely. I thought it was a tramp who had strayed into the meadow bottom. But when I turned to give him a level glance, he simply wasn't there. It was as if he melted into the miry ground, the cat-tails, the sedges."

"That isn't a bad description of Chapman," I said. "I remember his whiskers—they were almost white, except for the tobacco juice. A battered antique, if there ever was one—and very unamiable, too. He had a poisonous glare toward the end, which no doubt helped along the legend of his insanity. Some of the tales about him come back to me now. People said that he neglected the care of his orchard more and more. Visitors used to find him in that lower meadow, standing idly about and staring vacantly at the trees and water. Probably that was one reason they thought he was losing his mind. But I'm sure I never heard that there was anything unusual or queer about the meadow, either at the time of Chapman's death, or since. It's a lonely spot, and I don't imagine that any one ever goes there now."

"I stumbled on it quite by accident," said Amberville. "The place isn't visible from the road, on account of the thick

pines. . . . But there's another odd thing: I went out this morning with a very strong and clear intuition that I might find something of uncommon interest. I made a bee-line for that meadow, so to speak; and I'll have to admit that the intuition justified itself. The place repels me—but it fascinates me, too. I've simply got to solve the mystery, if it has a solution," he added, with a slightly defensive air. "I'm going back early tomorrow, with my oils, to start a real painting of it."

I was surprized, knowing that predilection of Amberville for scenic brilliance and gayety which had caused him to be likened to Sorolla. "The painting will be a novelty for you," I commented. "I'll have to come and take a look at the place myself, before long. It should really be more in my line than yours. There ought to be a weird story in it somewhere, if it lives up to your drawings and description."

SEVERAL days passed. I was deeply preoccupied, at the time, with the toilsome and intricate problems offered by the concluding chapters of a new novel; and I put off my proposed visit to the meadow discovered by Amberville. My friend, on his part, was evidently engrossed by his new theme. He sallied forth each morning with his easel and oil-colors, and returned later each day, forgetful of the luncheon-hour that had formerly brought him back from such expeditions. On the third day, he did not reappear till sunset. Contrary to his custom, he did not show me what he had done, and his answers to my queries regarding the progress of the picture were somewhat vague and evasive. For some reason, he was unwilling to talk about it. Also, he was apparently loth to discuss the meadow itself, and in answer to direct questions, merely reiterated in an absent and perfunctory manner the account he had given me following his discovery of the place. In some mysterious way that I could not define, his attitude seemed to have changed.

There were other changes, too. He seemed to have lost his usual blitheness. Often I caught him frowning intently, and surprized the lurking of some equivocal shadow in his frank eyes. There was a moodiness, a morbidity, which, as far as our five years' friendship enabled me to observe, was a new aspect of his temperament. Perhaps, if I had not been so preoccupied with my own difficulties, I might have wondered more as to the causation of his gloom, which I attributed readily enough at first to some technical dilemma that was baffling him. He was less and less the Amberville that I knew; and on the fourth day, when he came back at twilight, I perceived an actual surliness that was quite foreign to his nature.

"What's wrong?" I ventured to inquire. "Have you struck a snag? Or is old Chapman's meadow getting on your nerves with its ghostly influences?"

He seemed, for once, to make an effort to throw off his gloom, his taciturnity and ill humor.

"It's the infernal mystery of the thing," he declared. "I've simply got to solve it, in one way or another. The place has an entity of its own—an indwelling personality. It's there, like the soul in a human body, but I can't pin it down or touch it. You know that I'm not superstitious—but, on the other hand, I'm not a bigoted materialist, either; and I've run across some odd phenomena in my time. That meadow, perhaps, is inhabited by what the ancients called a *Genius Loci*. More than once, before this, I have suspected that such things might exist—might reside, inherent, in some particular spot.

But this is the first time that I've had reason to suspect anything of an actively malignant or inimical nature. The other influences, whose presence I have felt, were benign in some large, vague, impersonal way—or were else wholly indifferent to human welfare—perhaps oblivious of human existence. This thing, however, is hatefully aware and watchful: I feel that the meadow itself — or the force embodied in the meadow—is scrutinizing me all the time. The place has the air of a thirsty vampire, waiting to drink me in somehow, if it can. It is a *cul-de-sac* of everything evil, in which an unwary soul might well be caught and absorbed. But I tell you, Murray, I can't keep away from it."

"It looks as if the place *were* getting you," I said, thoroughly astonished by his extraordinary declaration, and by the air of fearful and morbid conviction with which he uttered it.

Apparently he had not heard me, for he made no reply to my observation. "There's another angle," he went on, with a feverish tensity in his voice. "You remember my impression of an old man lurking in the background and watching me, on my first visit. Well, I have seen him again, many times, out of the corner of my eye; and during the last two days, he has appeared more directly, though in a queer, partial way. Sometimes, when I am studying the dead willow very intently, I see his scowling filthy-bearded face as a part of the bole. Then, again, it will float among the leafless twigs, as if it had been caught there. Sometimes a knotty hand, a tattered coat-sleeve, will emerge through the mantling algæ in the pool, as if a drowned body were rising to the surface. Then, a moment later—or simultaneously—there will be something of him among the alders or the cat-tails. These apparitions are always brief, and when I try to scrutinize them closely, they melt like films of vapor into the surrounding scene. But the old scoundrel, whoever or whatever he may be, is a sort of fixture. He is no less vile than everything else about the place, though I feel that he isn't the main element of the vileness."

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "You certainly have been seeing things. If you don't mind, I'll come down and join you for a while, tomorrow afternoon. The mystery begins to inveigle me."

"Of course I don't mind. Come ahead." His manner, all at once, for no tangible reason, had resumed the unnatural taciturnity of the past four days. He gave me a furtive look that was sullen and almost unfriendly. It was as if an obscure barrier, temporarily laid aside, had again risen between us. The shadows of his strange mood returned upon him visibly; and my efforts to continue the conversation were rewarded only by half-surly, half-absent monosyllables. Feeling an aroused concern, rather than any offense, I began to note, for the first time, the unwonted pallor of his face, and the bright, febrile luster of his eyes. He looked vaguely unwell, I thought, as if something of his exuberant vitality had gone out of him, and had left in its place an alien energy of doubtful and less healthy nature. Tacitly, I gave up any attempt to bring him back from the secretive twilight into which he had withdrawn. For the rest of the evening, I pretended to read a novel, while Amberville maintained his singular abstraction. Somewhat inconclusively, I puzzled over the matter till bed-time. I made up my mind, however, that I would visit Chapman's meadow. I did not believe in the supernatural, but it seemed apparent that the place was exerting a deleterious influence upon Amberville.

THE next morning, when I arose, my Chinese servant informed me that the painter had already breakfasted and had gone out with his easel and colors. This further proof of his obsession troubled me; but I applied myself rigorously to a forenoon of writing.

Immediately after luncheon, I drove down the highway, followed the narrow dirt road that branched off toward Bear River, and left my car on the pine-thick hill above the old Chapman place. Though I had never visited the meadow, I had a pretty clear idea of its location. Disregarding the grassy, half-obliterated road into the upper portion of the property, I struck down through the woods into the little blind valley, seeing more than once, on the opposite slope, the dying orchard of pear and apple trees, and the tumbledown shanty that had belonged to the Chapmans.

It was a warm October day; and the serene solitude of the forest, the autumnal softness of light and air, made the idea of anything malign or sinister seem impossible. When I came to the meadow bottom, I was ready to laugh at Amberville's notions; and the place itself, at first sight, merely impressed me as being rather dreary and dismal. The features of the scene were those that he had described so clearly, but I could not find the open evil that had leered from the pool, the willow, the alders and the cat-tails in his drawings.

Amberville, with his back toward me, was seated on a folding stool before his easel, which he had placed among the plots of dark green wire-grass in the open ground above the pool. He did not seem to be working, however, but was staring intently at the scene beyond him, while a loaded brush drooped idly in his fingers. The sedges deadened my footfalls; and he did not hear me as I drew near.

With much curiosity, I peered over his shoulder at the large canvas on which he had been engaged. As far as I could tell, the picture had already been carried to a consummate degree of technical perfection. It was an almost photographic rendering of the scummy water, the whitish skeleton of the leaning willow, the unhealthy, half-disrooted alders, and the cluster of nodding mace-reeds. But in it I found the macabre and demoniac spirit of the sketches: the meadow seemed to wait and watch like an evilly distorted face. It was a deadfall of malignity and despair, lying apart from the autumn world around it; a plague-spot of nature, for ever accursed and alone.

Again I looked at the landscape itself —and saw that the spot was indeed as Amberville had depicted it. It wore the grimace of a mad vampire, hateful and alert! At the same time, I became disagreeably conscious of the unnatural silence. There were no birds, no insects, as the painter had said; and it seemed that only spent and dying winds could ever enter that depressed valley-bottom. The thin stream that lost itself in the boggy ground was like a soul that went down to perdition. It was part of the mystery, too; for I could not remember any stream on the lower side of the barring hill that would indicate a subterranean outlet.

Amberville's intentness, and the very posture of his head and shoulders, were like those of a man who has been mesmerized. I was about to make my presence known to him; but at that instant there came to me the apperception that we were not alone in the meadow. Just beyond the focus of my vision, a figure seemed to stand in a furtive attitude, as if watching us both. I whirled about—and there was no one. Then I heard a startled cry from Amberville, and turned

to find him staring at me. His features wore a wild look of terror and surprize, which had not wholly erased a hypnotic absorption.

"My God!" he said. "I thought you were the old man!"

I can not be sure whether anything more was said by either of us. I have, however, the impression of a blank silence. After his single exclamation of surprize, Amberville seemed to retreat into an impenetrable abstraction, as if he were no longer conscious of my presence; as if, having identified me, he had forgotten me at once. On my part, I felt a weird and overpowering constraint. That infamous, eery scene depressed me beyond measure. It seemed that the boggy bottom was trying to drag me down in some intangible way. The boughs of the sick alders beckoned. The pool, over which the bony willows presided like an arboreal Death, was wooing me foully with its stagnant waters.

Moreover, apart from the ominous atmosphere of the scene itself, I was painfully aware of a further change in Amberville—a change that was an actual alienation. His recent mood, whatever it was, had strengthened upon him enormously: he had gone deeper into its morbid twilight, and was lost to the blithe and sanguine personality I had known. It was as if an incipient madness had seized him; and the possibility of this terrified me.

In a slow, somnambulistic manner, without giving me a second glance, he began to work at his painting, and I watched him for a while, hardly knowing what to do or say. For long intervals he would stop and peer with dreamy intentness at some feature of the landscape. I conceived the bizarre idea of a growing kinship, a mysterious *rapport* between Amberville and the meadow. In some intangible way, it seemed as if the place had taken something from his very soul—and had given something of itself in exchange. He wore the air of one who participates in some unholy secret, who has become the acolyte of an unhuman knowledge. In a flash of horrible definitude, I saw the place as an actual vampire, and Amberville as its willing victim.

How long I remained there, I can not say. Finally I stepped over to him and shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"You're working too hard," I said. "Take my advice, and lay off for a day or two."

He turned to me with the dazed look of one who is lost in some narcotic dream. This, very slowly, gave place to a sullen, evil anger.

"Oh, go to hell!" he snarled. "Can't you see that I'm busy?"

I left him then, for there seemed nothing else to do under the circumstances. The mad and spectral nature of the whole affair was enough to make me doubt my own reason. My impressions of the meadow—and of Amberville—were tainted with a delirious horror such as I had never before felt in any moment of waking life and normal consciousness.

At the bottom of the slope of yellow pine, I turned back with repugnant curiosity for a parting glance. The painter had not moved, he was still confronting the malignant scene like a charmed bird that faces a lethal serpent. Whether or not the impression was a double optic image, I have never been sure: but at that instant I seemed to discern a faint, unholy aura, neither light nor mist, that flowed and wavered about the meadow, preserving the outlines of the willow, the alders, the reeds, the pool. Stealthily it appeared to lengthen, reaching toward Amberville like ghostly arms. The whole image was extremely tenuous, and may well have

been an illusion; but it sent me shuddering into the shelter of the tall, benignant pines.

THE remainder of that day, and the evening that followed, were tinged with the shadowy horror I had found in Chapman's meadow. I believe that I spent most of the time in arguing vainly with myself, in trying to convince the rational part of my mind that all I had seen and felt was utterly preposterous. I could arrive at no conclusion, other than a conviction that Amberville's mental health was endangered by the damnable thing, whatever it was, that inhered in the meadow. The malign personality of the place, the impalpable terror, mystery and lure, were like webs that had been woven upon my brain, and which I could not dissipate by any amount of conscious effort.

I made two resolves, however: one was, that I should write immediately to Amberville's fiancée, Miss Avis Olcott, and invite her to visit me as a fellow-guest of the artist during the remainder of his stay at Bowman. Her influence, I thought, might help to counteract whatever was affecting him so perniciously. Since I knew her fairly well, the invitation would not seem out of the way. I decided to say nothing about it to Amberville: the element of surprize, I hoped, would be especially beneficial.

My second resolve was, that I should not again visit the meadow myself, if I could avoid it. Indirectly—for I knew the folly of trying to combat a mental obsession openly—I should also try to discourage the painter's interest in the place, and divert his attention to other themes. Trips and entertainments, too, could be devised, at the minor cost of delaying my own work.

The smoky autumn twilight overtook me in such meditations as these; but Amberville did not return. Horrible premonitions, without coherent shape or name, began to torment me as I waited for him. The night darkened; and dinner grew cold on the table. At last, about nine o'clock, when I was nerving myself to go out and hunt for him, he came in hurriedly. He was pale, dishevelled, out of breath; and his eyes held a painful glare, as if something had frightened him beyond endurance.

He did not apologize for his lateness; nor did he refer to my own visit to the meadow-bottom. Apparently he had forgotten the whole episode—had forgotten his rudeness to me.

"I'm through!" he cried. "I'll never go back again — never take another chance. That place is more hellish at night than in the daytime. I can't tell you what I've seen and felt—I must forget it, if I can. There's an emanation—something that comes out openly in the absence of the sun, but is latent by day. It lured me, it tempted me to remain this evening — and it nearly got me. . . . God! I didn't believe that such things were possible—that abhorrent compound of——" He broke off, and did not finish the sentence. His eyes dilated, as if with the memory of something too awful to be described. At that moment, I recalled the poisonously haunted eyes of old Chapman, whom I had sometimes met about the hamlet. He had not interested me particularly, since I had deemed him a common type of rural character, with a tendency to some obscure and unpleasant aberration. Now, when I saw the same look in the eyes of a sensitive artist, I began to wonder, with a shivering speculation, whether Chapman too had been aware of the weird evil that dwelt in his meadow. Perhaps, in some way that was beyond human comprehen-

sion, he had been its victim. . . . He had died there; and his death had not seemed at all mysterious. But perhaps, in the light of all that Amberville and I had perceived, there was more in the matter than any one had suspected.

"Tell me what you saw," I ventured to suggest.

At the question, a veil seemed to fall between us, impalpable but tenebrific. He shook his head morosely and made no reply. The human terror, which perhaps had driven him back toward his normal self, and had made him almost communicative for the nonce, fell away from Amberville. A shadow that was darker than fear, an impenetrable alien umbrage, again submerged him. I felt a sudden chill, of the spirit rather than the flesh; and once more there came to me the outré thought of his growing kinship with the ghoulish meadow. Beside me, in the lamplit room, behind the mask of his humanity, a thing that was not wholly human seemed to sit and wait.

OF THE nightmarish days that followed, I shall offer only a summary. It would be impossible to convey the eventless, fantasmal horror in which we dwelt and moved.

I wrote immediately to Miss Olcott, pressing her to pay me a visit during Amberville's stay, and, in order to insure acceptance, I hinted obscurely at my concern for his health and my need of her coadjutation. In the meanwhile, waiting her answer, I tried to divert the artist by suggesting trips to sundry points of scenic interest in the neighborhood. These suggestions he declined, with an aloof curtness, an air that was stony and cryptic rather than deliberately rude. Virtually, he ignored my existence, and made it more than plain that he wished me to leave him to his own devices. This, in despair, I finally decided to do, pending the arrival of Miss Olcott. He went out early each morning, as usual, with his paints and easel, and returned about sunset or a little later. He did not tell me where he had been; and I refrained from asking.

Miss Olcott came on the third day following my letter, in the afternoon. She was young, lissome, ultra-feminine, and was altogether devoted to Amberville. In fact, I think she was a little in awe of him. I told her as much as I dared, and warned her of the morbid change in her fiancé, which I attributed to nervousness and overwork. I simply could not bring myself to mention Chapman's meadow and its baleful influence: the whole thing was too unbelievable, too fantasmagoric, to be offered as an explanation to a modern girl. When I saw the somewhat helpless alarm and bewilderment with which she listened to my story, I began to wish that she were of a more wilful and determined type, and were less submissive toward Amberville than I surmised her to be. A stronger woman might have saved him; but even then I began to doubt whether Avis could do anything to combat the imponderable evil that was engulfing him.

A heavy crescent moon was hanging like a blood-dipped horn in the twilight when he returned. To my immense relief, the presence of Avis appeared to have a highly salutary effect. The very moment that he saw her, Amberville came out of the singular eclipse that had claimed him, as I feared, beyond redemption, and was almost his former affable self. Perhaps it was all make-believe, for an ulterior purpose; but this, at the time, I could not suspect. I began to congratulate myself on having applied a sovereign remedy. The girl, on her part, was plainly relieved; though I saw her eyeing him in a slightly

hurt and puzzled way, when he sometimes fell for a short interval into moody abstraction, as if he had temporarily forgotten her. On the whole, however, there was a transformation that appeared no less than magical, in view of his recent gloom and remoteness. After a decent interim, I left the pair together, and retired.

I rose very late the next morning, having overslept. Avis and Amberville, I learned, had gone out together, carrying a lunch which my Chinese cook had provided. Plainly he was taking her along on one of his artistic expeditions; and I augured well for his recovery from this. Somehow, it never occurred to me that he had taken her to Chapman's meadow. The tenuous, malignant shadow of the whole affair had begun to lift from my mind; I rejoiced in a lightened sense of responsibility; and, for the first time in a week, was able to concentrate clearly on the ending of my novel.

The two returned at dusk, and I saw immediately that I had been mistaken on more points than one. Amberville had again retired into a sinister, saturnine reserve. The girl, beside his looming height and massive shoulders, looked very small, forlorn — and pitifully bewildered and frightened. It was as if she had encountered something altogether beyond her comprehension, something with which she was humanly powerless to cope.

Very little was said by either of them. They did not tell me where they had been; but, for that matter, it was unnecessary to inquire. Amberville's taciturnity, as usual, seemed due to an absorption in some dark mood or sullen revery. But Avis gave me the impression of a dual constraint—as if, apart from some enthralling terror, she had been forbidden to speak of the day's events and experiences. I knew that they had gone to that accursed meadow; but I was far from sure whether Avis had been personally conscious of the weird and baneful entity of the place, or had merely been frightened by the unwholesome change in her lover beneath its influence. In either case, it was obvious that she was wholly subservient to him. I began to damn myself for a fool in having invited her to Bowman — though the true bitterness of my regret was still to come.

A WEEK went by, with the same daily excursions of the painter and his fiancée—the same baffling, sinister estrangement and secrecy in Amberville —the same terror, helplessness, constraint and submissiveness in the girl. How it would all end, I could not imagine; but I feared, from the ominous alteration of his character, that Amberville was heading for some form of mental alienation, if nothing worse. My offers of entertainments and scenic journeys were rejected by the pair; and several blunt efforts to question Avis were met by a wall of almost hostile evasion which convinced me that Amberville had enjoined her to secrecy — and had perhaps, in some sleightful manner, misrepresented my own attitude toward him.

"You don't understand him," she said, repeatedly. "He is very temperamental."

The whole affair was a maddening mystery, but it seemed more and more that the girl herself was being drawn, either directly or indirectly, into the same fantasmal, evil web that had enmeshed the artist.

I surmised that Amberville had done several new pictures of the meadow; but he did not show them to me, nor even mention them. My own impressions of the place, as time went on, assumed an unaccountable vividness that was almost hallucinatory. The incredible idea of

some inherent force or personality, malevolent and even vampirish, became an unavowed conviction against my will. The place haunted me like a fantasm, horrible but seductive. I felt an impelling morbid curiosity, an unwholesome desire to visit it again, and fathom, if possible, its enigma. Often I thought of Amberville's notion about a *Genius Loci* that dwelt in the meadow, and the hints of a human apparition that was somehow associated with the spot. Also, I wondered what it was that the artist had seen on the one occasion when he had lingered in the meadow after nightfall, and had returned to my house in driven terror. It seemed that he had not ventured to repeat the experiment, in spite of his obvious subjection to the unknown lure.

The end came, abruptly and without premonition. Business had taken me to the county seat, one afternoon, and I did not return till late in the evening. A full moon was high above the pine-dark hills. I expected to find Avis and the painter in my drawing-room; but they were not there. Li Sing, my factotum, told me that they had returned at dinner-time. An hour later, Amberville had gone out quietly while the girl was in her room. Coming down a few minutes later, Avis had shown excessive perturbation when she found him absent, and had also left the house, as if to follow him, without telling Li Sing where she was going or when she might return. All this had occurred three hours previously; and neither of the pair had yet reappeared.

A BLACK and subtly chilling intuition of evil seized me as I listened to Li Sing's account. All too well I surmised that Amberville had yielded to the temptation of a second nocturnal visit to that unholy meadow. An occult attraction, somehow, had overcome the horror of his first experience, whatever it had been. Avis, knowing where he was, and perhaps fearful of his sanity — or safety — had gone out to find him. More and more, I felt an imperative conviction of some peril that threatened them both—some hideous and innominable thing to whose power, perhaps, they had already yielded.

Whatever my previous folly and remissness in the matter, I did not delay now. A few minutes of driving at precipitate speed through the mellow moonlight brought me to the piny edge of the Chapman property. There, as on my former visit, I left the car, and plunged headlong through the shadowy forest. Far down, in the hollow, as I went, I heard a single scream, shrill with terror, and abruptly terminated. I felt sure that the voice was that of Avis; but I did not hear it again.

Running desperately, I emerged in the meadow-bottom. Neither Avis nor Amberville was in sight; and it seemed to me, in my hasty scrutiny, that the place was full of mysteriously coiling and moving vapors that permitted only a partial view of the dead willow and the other vegetation. I ran on toward the scummy pool, and nearing it, was arrested by a sudden and twofold horror.

Avis and Amberville were floating together in the shallow pool, with their bodies half hidden by the mantling masses of algæ. The girl was clasped tightly in the painter's arms, as if he had carried her with him, against her will, to that noisome death. Her face was covered by the evil, greenish scum; and I could not see the face of Amberville, which was averted against her shoulder. It seemed that there had been a struggle; but both were quiet now, and had yielded supinely to their doom.

It was not this spectacle alone, however, that drove me in mad and shudder-

ing flight from the meadow, without making even the most tentative attempt to retrieve the drowned bodies. The true horror lay in the thing, which, from a little distance, I had taken for the coils of a slowly moving and rising mist. It was *not* vapor, nor anything else that could conceivably exist—that malign, luminous, pallid Emanation that enfolded the entire scene before me like a restless and hungrily wavering extension of its outlines—a phantom projection of the pale and death-like willow, the dying alders, the reeds, the stagnant pool and its suicidal victims. The landscape was visible through it, as through a film; but it seemed to curdle and thicken gradually in places, with some unholy, terrifying activity. Out of these curdlings, as if disgorged by the ambient exhalation, I saw the emergence of three human faces that partook of the same nebulous matter, neither mist nor plasm. One of these faces seemed to detach itself from the bole of the ghostly willow; the second and third swirled upward from the seething of the phantom pool, with their bodies trailing formlessly among the tenuous boughs. The faces were those of old Chapman, of Francis Amberville, and Avis Olcott.

Behind this eery, wraith-like projection of itself, the actual landscape leered with the same infernal and vampirish air which it had worn by day. But it seemed now that the place was no longer still—that it seethed with a malignant secret life—that it reached out toward me with its scummy waters, with the bony fingers of its trees, with the spectral faces it had spewed forth from its lethal deadfall.

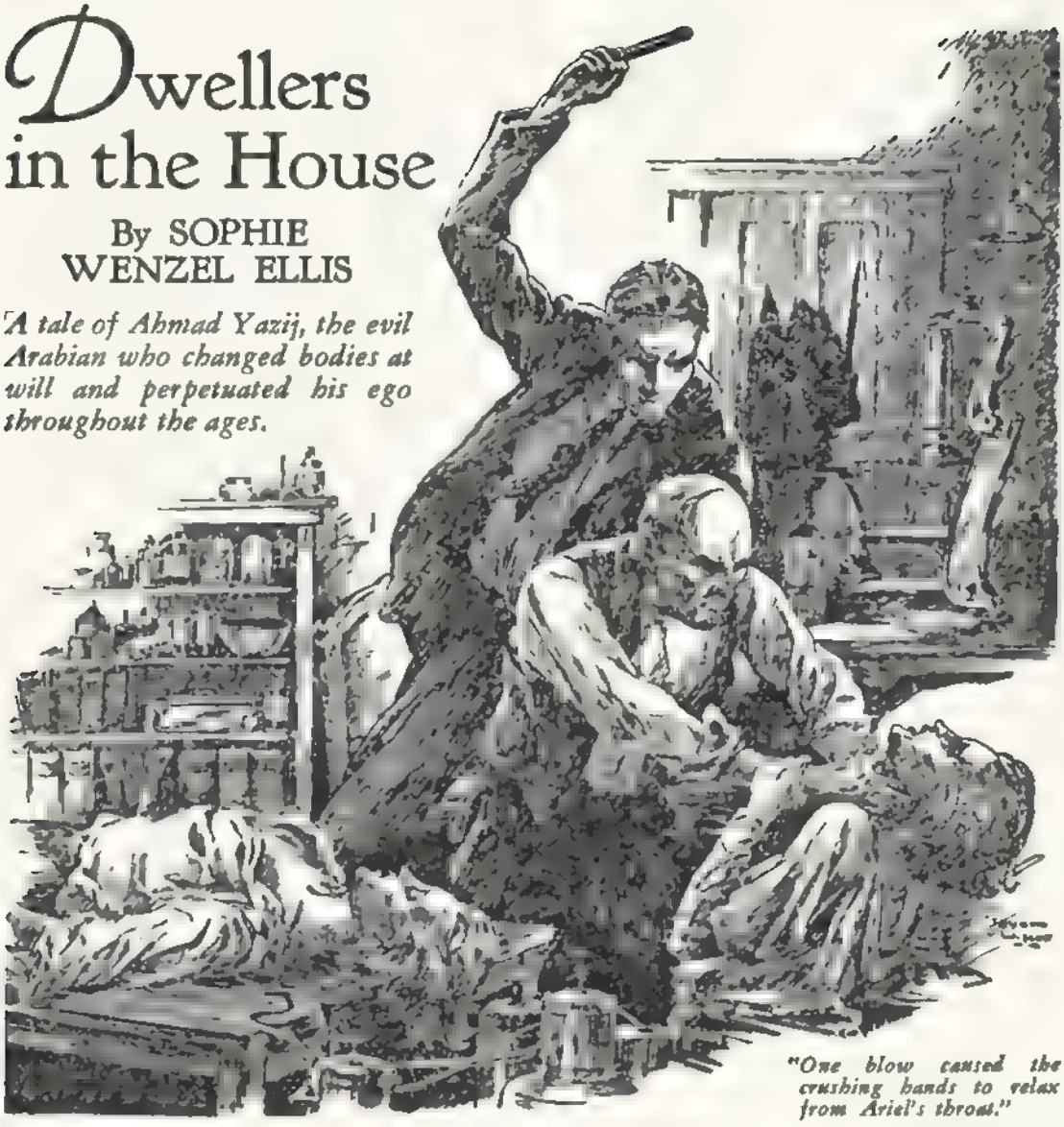
Even terror was frozen within me for a moment. I stood watching, while the pale, unhallowed exhalation rose higher above the meadow. The three human faces, through a further agitation of the curdling mass, began to approach each other. Slowly, inexpressibly, they merged in one, becoming an androgynous face, neither young nor old, that melted finally into the lengthening phantom boughs of the willow—the hands of the arboreal Death, that were reaching out to enfold me. Then, unable to bear the spectacle any longer, I started to run.

THERE is little more that need be told, for nothing that I could add to this narrative would lessen the abominable mystery of it all in any degree. The meadow—or the thing that dwells in the meadow—has already claimed three victims . . . and I sometimes wonder if it will have a fourth. I alone, it would seem, among the living, have guessed the secret of Chapman's death, and the death of Avis and Amberville; and no one else, apparently, has felt the malign genius of the meadow. I have not returned there, since the morning when the bodies of the artist and his fiancée were removed from the pool . . . nor have I summoned up the resolution to destroy or otherwise dispose of the four oil paintings and two water-color drawings of the spot that were made by Amberville. Perhaps . . . in spite of all that deters me . . . I shall visit it again.

The Dwellers in the House

By SOPHIE WENZEL ELLIS

A tale of Ahmad Yazij, the evil Arabian who changed bodies at will and perpetuated his ego throughout the ages.



"One blow caused the crushing hands to relax from Ariel's throat."

"AND may God have mercy on your soul."

The closing words of the death sentence rolled out solemnly in Judge Farrington's cavernous voice.

"And may Allah have mercy on yours!"

Ahmad Yazij, the convicted murderer, who throughout the trial had sat in an indifferent heap, leaped up and pointed a shriveled brown finger at the judge.

The sudden quiet in the crowded courtroom was more dramatic than any outcry of horror could have been; every one knew that the Arabian spoke with the venom of a sorcerer pronouncing a curse.

Judge Farrington, white and visibly disturbed, pounded his gavel.

"Remove the prisoner!"

Two officers seized Yazij roughly and

hurried him away. The strange man's shoulders shook with laughter, as though he enjoyed a gruesome joke. At the door he turned his brown, wizened face and shot a parting look of hate at the judge.

"We shall meet again, *yah abu 'l jood!*"

Throughout the trial it had been thus, hate flashing between the benevolent judge beloved for his mercy and the prisoner at the bar who had not cared whether or not he was convicted of murdering the young man who had assisted him in the evil hideout Yazij had called his laboratory. Frequently, to the thwarted curiosity of the audience, the judge and Yazij had exchanged heated Arabic. Judge Farrington was a rather profound scholar.

From the first, it seemed that the judge had wanted to convict Yazij, who had not employed an attorney to defend himself. The judge had appointed young Rodney Sterrick as attorney for the defense, who was so deeply in love with beautiful Ariel Farrington that he dared not risk his prospects by objecting to the impassioned vituperation that her learned father had hurled at Yazij, and to some of the damning questions he had asked in his judicial cross-examination. That was the whisper that often went around the courtroom.

Now, after the prisoner had been taken away, Rod said to the judge, "Why were you so hard on the poor devil?"

Healthy color flamed angrily in the other's broad face.

"Poor devil! Leave off the poor. Execution is too good for him. My God, Rod!" He mopped at his brow with a moist handkerchief. "Didn't you feel it, too—the damnable excreta of—of inhumanness that fouls the very atmosphere he breathes?"

"He's only a very dirty old man, a little mad, perhaps——"

"Do you know anything of Eastern occultism? No, you don't. You didn't see what I saw in him, a creature whose least crime would be the killing of the man whose mutilated body was found buried in that pestilential yard behind Yazij's den. You remember the strange evidence of the coroner, that Vaynce's body, although little decayed, weighed only forty-five pounds. Think of it! A man fairly well-fleshed weighing so little! Is that natural?"

"But the coroner said he might have had some unknown disease which wasted the tissues mysteriously."

The judge laughed. "Of course, you had to have some kind of defense for your client, Rod."

At that moment a deputy approached and told Rod that Yazij wished to see him immediately, before being taken to the penitentiary.

A FEW minutes later Rod went to the jail, where the prisoner was temporarily confined. Now, as always, he squirmed as he approached Yazij's cell, for about it hung a foul stench. He had thought it resulted from the Arab's unwashed flesh and clothes, but his talk with the judge made him shiver with dread.

"Yazij!" he called to the heap on the cot beyond the bars.

The Arab lifted his head, revealing a face the color of rotten leather. As he came forward, his over-large clothes seemed to bring the foul odor closer. Through the bars he poked a shrunken hand holding a folded paper.

"Meester lawyer, you have ask for no fee—*Allah hadik!* But I give you fee, eh? Here, take."

Rod took the paper, odorous with the stench. In good English, written evi-

dently by the jailer for Yazij's signature, he read:

I, Ahmad Yazij, do give to Rodney Sterrick all my possessions and belongings, including my most precious books, my furniture, and my equipment, all contained in my rooms at number 4 St. Louis Court. May he select a worthy buyer who will continue where I have ceased. I would suggest showing the lot to the honorable Judge Farrington, who has knowledge of things forgotten.

AHMAD YAZIJ.

A wave of pity for the condemned man swept over Rod.

"Thanks, Yazij," he said. "But I did not ask for a fee."

"No. I give you fee. The honorable judge, learning about Ahmad Yazij's books—and secrets—will want to buy. *Aywah!*"

Rod looked uncomfortable. "I did my best for you, Yazij."

"Your best. Death, it is not bad; only a moving from an old house fallen to ruins. I move from old house before. I move again."

His matted eyebrows lifted enough to let Rod see his rheumy old eyes; old, old eyes that looked too ancient to be quite human.

"Allah yeseelim!"

The leathery face sank among the clothes that bundled him from neck to feet. Without sound he turned and moved back to the cot. Rod was dismissed.

He sought Judge Farrington again immediately, who read Yazij's note.

"Hmmm! Have you seen the stuff yet, Rod?"

"Only casually, when I went to his rooms while I was getting up the defense. It is a damp, musty, unpleasant place, full of terribly old books."

"The books—ah!" The judge's eyes leaped. "You know what a bookworm I am, Rod, especially over old Eastern books. Have dinner with us tonight, and then you and I shall inspect Yazij's stuff."

And so it was arranged. After dinner at the Farrington home and an hour of delight with lovely Ariel Farrington, Rod and the judge drove to the semi-slum section where Ahmad Yazij had made his home above a questionable second-hand shop.

Up dark, creaking steps that hugged the building's moldy side they mounted to the door that gave on a landing. Rod unlocked the door and plunged his hand cautiously into the darkness to reach for the light switch. The stale air seemed thick and slimy against his flesh.

THE room came alive suddenly under the dim light; a room hung with archaic maps, strewn with braziers, bunches of dried herbs, pieces of metal, and broken furniture. Dangling from the ceiling and laced thickly in corners, black cobwebs seemed trying to hide the time-festered books that made crooked rows against the walls.

"My God, Rod! What books!"

Judge Farrington went to one of the disordered shelves and removed a volume, a thick, misshapen mass of crumbling leaves between yellowed parchment covers. As he read here and there, all the healthy color faded from his face; but still he continued to turn the pages with avid eagerness.

Rod looked over his shoulder. It was written in Arabic.

"Can you really read it, Judge?"

Judge Farrington gulped hard, as though something stuck in his throat.

"It is an ancient work on Eastern occultism. But the strangest thing about it is the name of the author. Ahmad Yazij, Rod!"

"An ancestor of the Yazij we know?"

"I hope so. Listen."

He paused to read a certain passage, and then translated it slowly:

Each time I do move into a new House I grow stronger and more able to conquer the other

dwellers in the House, who make war with each other and disturb the flesh. For a thousand—nay, ten thousand years—will I work to acquire a House to my liking, and then will I have the power to cast out the other dwellers and have eternal life with the one Self.

"What a lot of gibberish!" Rod scoffed.

"Nothing that these ancient Arabs wrote is gibberish, Rod. Until I have studied the entire book, of course, I can not understand what he means, although I have an idea." He shivered visibly.

While the judge continued to examine the crumbling books, Rod puzzled himself over the only modern-looking thing in the room, an appliance that slightly resembled a spectroscope, yet much larger than the common prism spectroscope. Instead of being fitted with a flint prism, it carried in its middle a giant vacuum tube.

"Look here, Judge! What an anachronism! This modern instrument placed among objects of incalculable age!"

Judge Farrington left the books and came toward the colossal spectroscope. But it was not the strange appliance that claimed his attention; he paused over a recently written manuscript lying on a table close by. As he read, his face seemed to grow thinner.

"Rod!" he exclaimed. "I am not sure that I ought to dare do this, for I may be courting destruction. But I'm going to buy the whole lot from you, just as Yazij suggested. There's a strange mystery here, and I'm going to discover it."

"What do you suspect?"

"Nothing. My mind refuses to accept the evidence. Rod! What would you think if you knew that half of this library is written by Ahmad Yazij, and that some of the books bearing his name are hundreds of years older than others?"

"Why, I'd say that there was a long line of Ahmad Yaziis."

The other's smile was sickly. "You'd have to say that—for your sanity's sake. And now, you'll sell me the stuff, won't you?"

And thus Judge Farrington came into possession of all the effects of Ahmad Yazij. He had them moved to his home the next day, where he established an attic den which he always kept locked.

FROM the moment that he became a confessed disciple of the seer, or the long line of seers who had written the books he had bought, a subtle change came over Judge Farrington. Rod and every one else who came in contact with him in the courtroom saw his kindness and joviality change into harshness and ill-temper, until, before a month had passed, there was talk among the lawyers of trying to get him impeached.

Some even whispered that his great mind was decaying, for his favorite topic of conversation was Ahmad Yazij. He seemed to take an unhealthy interest in the execution, which the governor had set for an unusually early date after the conviction. Ariel Farrington complained to Rod that every moment of her father's spare time was spent in his den, where, far into the night, his light burned, and where muttering and mumbling could be heard, as though her father were holding conversation with some one who was certainly not in the room with him.

And now came the day for Ahmad Yazij to die. At dawn he went indifferently to the electric chair. Rod, sleeping after an uneasy night, was awakened before six o'clock by the ringing of his telephone. Ariel was on the line.

"Can you run over immediately, Rod? Some kind of attack has seized Father. Just at daybreak I heard a terrible scream from the attic. When we got the door broken in, we found Father lying on the

floor unconscious, with a frightful look on his face. I've called a doctor, but can't you come over and be with me until he comes? Father is still unconscious."

"Coming!" Rod assured her. But as he turned from the telephone, his face was pasty-white. Why had Judge Farrington received his stroke at the very moment when Ahmad Yazij had gone to his death?

At the Farrington home he found the judge still unconscious, jabbering almost constantly in broken Arabic.

Ariel, her beautiful face showing traces of tears, seemed reluctant to be alone a moment with the father she adored.

"I'm afraid of him, Rod!" she confessed. "He almost doesn't seem like Father."

"The doctor will bring him around when he gets here," Rod said cheerfully.

But the doctor's efforts did not seem rapidly successful. The judge still remained unconscious. He remained thus until the sudden tense excitement of newsboys screaming "Extry!" broke in the street below.

"Extry paper! Stowall Vaynce alive! Stowall Vaynce——"

"Vaynce!" shrieked Judge Farrington. He sat up in bed and looked around him almost calmly. "That was the man Ahmad Yazij killed. Get me a paper."

Rod, feeling the nearness of some hidden horror, rushed out for a paper. The headlines glared at him.

STOWALL VAYNCE
RETURNS ALIVE

HIS ALLEGED SLAYER
EXECUTED THIS MORNING

A few minutes after Ahmad Yazij had died early this morning in the electric chair for the murder of Stowall Vaynce, a man calling himself Vaynce appeared at police headquarters, saying he had just returned from a western trip. Vaynce is being held until the body of the murdered man has been exhumed.

Rod did not finish reading, but took the paper to Judge Farrington, who almost snatched it from his hands.

"Ah!" the completely recovered man said a few minutes later. "Then I was not wrong in what I thought I knew. What a mystery for them to crack their brains over!"

The chuckle he gave was so unlike the kind, dignified man he had been a few weeks ago that each one in the room sought the others' eyes uncomfortably. It was plain that Judge Farrington did not seem to regret even now that he had helped to bring Ahmad Yazij to his death.

Suddenly Rod stiffened and put a horrified hand to his nose. A foul odor, more horrible because of its subtle vagueness, began to grow in the room. It seemed to have had immediate conception and to gain strength with each passing second. Instantly he recognized that ancient putrescence, which brought terrible recollection of a leathery-faced Arab waiting stoically for death. Judge Farrington swung himself out of bed, and the odor stirred with him, filling the room with horror.

"I'm going to my den," he announced calmly. "I'm all right now."

Even the doctor could not detain him, and as he brushed by Rod, the young man gasped over the cloud of stench that seemed to flow from the very pores of his body.

In passing, Judge Farrington gave Rod a long, deep glance, with a whisper that caused his scalp to stir.

"Don't be alarmed, my lawyer. *Mektoob!*"

Accent for accent, it was as though Ahmad Yazij had spoken.

Ariel cried out in consternation: "What is it, Rod? You are pale as a ghost!"

And then it was plain to Rod that only he had caught that hellish stench, and that he alone was aware of a beginning horror that hovered beyond the borderland of sanity.

He let Ariel bring him the drink he needed badly, cautioned her to keep close watch on her father, and then he went to police headquarters to wait for the first information on the Stowall Vaynce case.

He was present at the grave when the body was exhumed. The living Stowall Vaynce was also present. That young man, with frightened levity, declared he wanted to make sure that he was really alive. Vaynce said that he had been the only employee of Yazij, who had hired him as a subject for experiment with an instrument which Yazij had called a "soul spectroscope." Vaynce, a dull-witted fellow, could throw no light on what the experiments were. He only knew that he sometimes suffered pain in Yazij's laboratory, which had led him to run away from his master and hide in another city.

The mystery assumed new terror at the second examination of the body. Mark for mark, it was exactly like the live Vaynce. Scars; hair; Bertillon measurements; finger prints; all were perfect mates. The only difference between the two was weight. The body weighed only forty-five pounds, which was surprizing, while Vaynce weighed a little over one hundred, which also was surprizing, because he seemed rather well-fleshed.

Puzzled medical men claimed the body for a complete autopsy. Newspapers reporting their findings stated, in the language of the layman, that nothing abnormal had been discovered, although one scientist had declared that if the body had been in a better state of preservation he could probably have proved his opinion that almost two-thirds of its mass was made up of air cells instead of solid protoplasmic cells, a condition rare but not completely unknown in a less exaggerated degree.

And thus the strange matter remained a mystery, soon forgotten. For hadn't Ahmad Yazij been punished for whomever he had killed?

SCARCELY a week after the newspapers had stopped carrying Stowall Vaynce news, Judge Farrington astounded the bench and bar by resigning. He issued a statement to the press that he wished to retire for study and rest. Even Rod, who called at the Farrington home almost daily, could not learn his real reason for forsaking the career he loved. But a few days after the resignation, Ariel told Rod that her father had bought a secluded estate in an undeveloped part of the state, where he would go into retirement with his library.

"I'll have to go with him Rod," she said, with a touch of unhappiness. "You know, I've been daughter, mother and wife to him since Mother died. I can't forsake him now that this queer hobby is consuming his life."

Rod looked down hungrily into her exquisite face; sweet little Ariel, the sort of girl every young man dreams of knowing and loving. But it would be several years before he had built a practise to support a wife comfortably.

Now, when he longed to take her into his arms and tell her that he loved her, he only seized her hands and said miserably:

"I wish you did not have to go, Ariel. But will you promise to write to me every day and let me know everything that happens—everything?"

Ariel promised, and her blue eyes shyly promised something else, something that he had no right to accept now. But from the moment he saw her climb into her father's car to begin the journey to their new home, terror began to shadow him. For this restless-eyed John Farrington was certainly not the wholesome Judge Farrington he had known with respect and admiration. He did not even look the same. He had lost flesh and grown hollow of eye and jaw. Rod had to force himself *not* to think that his old friend looked a very little like the filthy Arab whose body now lay in a criminal's grave.

Ariel kept her promise to write every day. Her letters seemed cheerful enough; for she spoke of a beautiful countryside, of the comfort of the picturesque old pioneer homestead they occupied, and of her father's deep content with their new life. But through it all Rod thought he detected a subtle undertone of loneliness and uneasiness.

Several troublesome cases kept Rod so busy that three weeks passed before he could break away to see Ariel. His going then was not of his own choosing. A note from Ariel, written in nervous fright, urged him to come immediately. An hour later, he was driving to the remote hills which hid the Farrington retreat.

Long before he approached the little mountain town where the Farringtons received their mail, modern roads swept away into more densely settled regions and left only deeply rutted clay roads whose very impassability seemed a warning to strangers to keep away. Elemental nature was here, sullen, defiant, stupendously old in bare rock cliffs and narrow streams that had eaten deep into the hills. Life other than human was here in abundance. Crows especially were numerous. They followed Rod's car constantly, unnerving him with their sad hunger call. It was a lonely, desolate country for a young girl to live in with a father who might be a little mad.

WHEN he passed through the last settlement, the long summer afternoon was waning. For several miles he saw no houses, not even the time-rotted shacks that pocked the countryside behind. Soon he began to go down—down into a valley that cupped a broad, shallow lake. The water had a black, unwholesome look, except where a stinking green scum laid a gangrenous carpet along the edges.

So close to the brink of this lake that it must have received flood waters was the Farrington house, a rambling structure of thick, ancient logs backed by giant evergreen trees. He no sooner saw the house than he saw Ariel, too. She was standing knee-deep in the water, snatching at something that darted between the lily pads. She did not seem aware of him until he called to her.

"Rod!" she cried out gladly, and leaped toward the car.

In the instant before she threw herself into his arms, he saw that her dress was torn and soiled. That was completely unlike dainty Ariel. He was surprized, too, at the offer of her pouting red lips. He kissed them hungrily, his first kiss. Often he had dreamed of that kiss, but now, in a subtle way, it was disappointing.

"So glad to see you, Roddy!" she said lightly.

Rod held her off and looked hard at her, the pointed, cleft-chinned face, the blue eyes behind long curling brown lashes. He sensed a change in her, yet could not understand what it was.

"You don't seem so worried," he told her. "By your note asking me to hurry

here, I thought you were frightened about something."

"My note? Foolish!" She rubbed her cheek against his. It felt chilly and moist against his skin. "I didn't write you a note telling you to come."

"You did. What's the matter, Ariel?"

She laughed impishly, ignoring his question. "Look what I caught in the lake, Rod."

Reaching into the torn bosom of her dress, she drew forth a tiny green water-snake, languidly alive.

Again Rod felt vague horror, as though an unnatural effluvium of evil had laid a spell upon this whole strange country.

"What's the matter with you, Ariel? You'd put that thing in your bosom, you who used to be afraid of a worm? You're —you're a different girl."

"Silly! I'm not. I'm the same girl that topped your root beer with soap-suds last April Fool's day. The same one who stuck a pin in a rose and had you smell it."

Rod nodded, remembering. He also remembered her sudden remorse over both childish pranks. Dear little Ariel of a dozen moods! There was a streak of earth across one pink cheek, and a bit of water-weed was caught between her bare, perfect toes. Looking, Rod again felt that prickling of his scalp. Never had he seen this strange mood in her. It was as though all that was elfin and prankish in her were concentrated in the ragged little urchin laughing up at him, laughing from shallow, soulless eyes and lips that were not quite warm enough for a creature of warm human blood.

She was leading him to the house, her bare feet flying over the ground in happy, skipping steps. Her skirt was so torn that he could see her round white thigh as she moved.

"Isn't it lonesome for you, Ariel?" he asked.

"Not a bit. I'm helping Daddy in some mighty interesting work. And then I have the lake and the woods to play about in."

She turned to look back at him, and he saw that the green things about had reflected their own forest tint in the eyes that should be blue.

With an effort he pulled himself together. He was imagining things. That would never do. He needed all his common sense now.

As they entered the house, he saw that it was even older and cruder than it had seemed from the road. In an enormous living-room, furnished comfortably enough with many of the appointments that had been in the old city home, he waited while she went for her father.

IT WAS many minutes before John Farrington appeared, and then he stood in the door and called out rudely and sullenly: "Well?"

The change in the man was shocking. He had grown so thin he was almost lost in the clothes of former days.

"How are you, Judge?" Rod cried heartily, coming toward his old friend with outstretched hand, which the other ignored.

"I'm well enough, especially when I'm not interrupted. I'm busy now, Rod. I can't give you any time until after supper." He gestured to Ariel. "Get him something to eat, and then hurry and join me. I need you for an hour or two."

Turning, he left the room abruptly, while Ariel danced away with a promise of supper in a few minutes.

Rod felt a moment of anger. He was half tempted to leave immediately, but again his consciousness of latent mystery enveloped him. He would have to remain, for Ariel's sake.

In a few minutes the girl was back again, wheeling a tea-wagon bearing a cold supper. She had not changed her ragged clothes, and in this disheveled condition joined Rod in the meal.

Rod could not shake off his overpowering sense of unreality. He felt almost as though he were wandering in a dream. The pixy-faced ragamuffin facing him over the table could not be the Ariel he had wanted to marry. She scarcely stirred his pulses now, this pretty child-girl with the soulless eyes.

"What is your father doing now, Ariel?" he asked her. "Still poring over Ahmad Yazij's books, I suppose?"

"That—and other things."

"For instance?"

"Mind your business, Roddy. If you stay here long enough, *you'll* find out." She laughed teasingly, cocking her head birdwise and looking at him. "I suspect he'd like to work on you, at that—gentleman, cave-man, warm-hearted boy, cold-hearted lawyer. Oh! you'd be a case."

Rod found the meal singularly unpleasant. Each moment he was more convinced that Ariel was changed in a way that made him vaguely frantic with apprehension. Something he had loved in her, some primary characteristic which used to reach out to him and claim his very soul, seemed to have disappeared. It was almost as though the Ariel he had loved were dead, and this girl before him was only a laughing shadow that mocked him.

His final bewilderment came when Ariel threw herself on his knee. It was not her conduct that surprized him, but her *lack of weight*. He scarcely felt the pressure of her body. Suddenly he swooped her into his arms and lifted her, and the experiment brought a cry from him. She seemed no heavier than a baby. Was he facing another Stowall Vaynce mystery?

"Ariel!" he cried, putting her down hastily. "Tell me what your father does to you in his laboratory. Tell me!"

"Not now, old curiosity!" she teased, patting his cheek. "You'll find out, though. He's already told me that your turn was next. Now, run and play on the lake for an hour or two until he is through with me for the day."

She skipped away.

The house was suddenly repellent to Rod. He went outside, to walk along the lake edge. There was enough moonlight to make the going easy, and in a few minutes he was enjoying the scent of the water-lilies.

Gradually another odor began to impinge itself upon his sensibilities, a stench so unpleasant that his nostrils quivered. Closer to the brink he crept, to determine whether the smell came from the night-black waters which slapped among the lily pads.

And then, as the odor gained strength, terrific understanding came to him. His horrified nostrils drank in great breaths of the putrescence, for he had to be sure. He could not be mistaken. Aloud he groaned the name of the one being who could produce that evil stench.

"Ahmad Yazij!"

God! Could he ever forget that stench that reeked of disease and unspeakable corruption which sullied everything the Arab had touched? Mad fear almost sent him shrieking back to the house, but he controlled himself and forced his lagging steps onward. He had to go on. He felt that he was trailing something which he must see and know.

HE LEFT the trail along the bank's edge and went down to the slimy mud, to stumble over sprawling cypress knees and step into crayfish holes.

As he progressed, the foul odor became an effluvium so violently repellent that it seemed to well up from the cancerous depths of an elder world. In his hunger for more light, he used his cigarette-lighter. The feeble flame at least guided his footsteps in the immediate vicinity. A minute later, he was hysterically glad that he had this tiny spot of light, which saved his feet from abomination. For directly in his path, half buried in mud and water, was a human body.

For a moment, Rod paused, revolted. Here lay a woman. Her white dress and arms were coated so thickly with dried lake silt and scum that she seemed, in the moonlight, almost like a figure of clay. He swept his light over the still form. When it reached the face, his scream echoed through the giant cedar trees.

The woman was Ariel.

There could be no mistake, for only her face and her golden hair were undefiled by the mud. From the discolored hue of the flesh, the body must have been here several days. *It must have been here when he had talked to Ariel today!* It probably had been here when the note summoning him had been written.

He did not rush away immediately, a human revolted against a loved thing because it had ceased to be human; he stood there half paralyzed with the realization that he faced evil blacker than the down-pressing night. Now that he was close to the poor, lifeless shell to which that compelling odor had led him, he was conscious that the odor was gone. Only the natural smell of the lake ooze tainted the air, which after the foulness of the other, seemed cleaner than the breath of flowers.

Rod must have turned a little mad in that shocking moment before he could find his courage again, for he babbled foolishly.

"Ariel alive, Ariel dead! Stowall Vaynce alive, Stowall Vaynce dead! Ahmad Yazij dead, Ahmad Yazij——"

His voice caught in his throat. *Was Ahmad Yazij alive?* Ahmad Yazij, who had been writing books for hundreds of years?

With such insane thoughts upsetting his reason, he could not feel real grief over the girl's body at his feet. He was not viewing dead Ariel, but some sinister mystery which had no place on the earth. He tried to bring himself to touch the body to ascertain whether or not it was only visionary, but his shrinking hand was not capable of the revolting act. Drawing off his coat, he laid it over the muddy form, and was relieved to see that the coat really lay over something.

Then he ran back to the house. Darkness and stillness lay over the ancient wooden pile. Rod entered, passed through the great living-room, and on to the lean-to in the rear, where he saw a crack of light coming from under the door. This was John Farrington's study.

He was about to knock on the door when he heard a sound that sent quivering terror through him.

It was Ariel's voice, raised in a wild protest. "I won't! I won't!"

"Come now!" shouted her father, "I'll have no stubbornness. Get over there under the focus."

"For God's sake, Daddy, don't you see—can't you see that you've destroyed the last one? It is I now. Don't make me——"

Her words ended in a scream of despair.

Rod turned the door-knob frantically; the door was locked. With Ariel's voice begging for mercy spurring him to desperation, he flung himself against the an-

cient wood, and almost instantly a panel broke in.

Father and daughter were struggling, and just as Rod fell into the room, the father won. His hands found the white throat that strained away from him.

But Rod, instead of rushing in to the assistance of the girl he loved, stood paralyzed, every sense revolted against the insane sight that abominated his eyes.

There was one Ariel struggling with her father, and another stretched out on a table, apparently lifeless. The body on the table was the tattered ragamuffin he had met earlier in the evening, the stranger in Ariel's form who had puzzled and distressed him. The other Ariel, fighting for her life with the shrunken-faced creature who shrieked Arabic curses, was the well-groomed girl he hoped to marry.

In that dreadful moment of revelation, Rod knew that he did not face the real John Farrington, but the withered shell of his body housing a fiend. He seized the first object that his hands touched, a heavy metal tube. One blow from this caused the crushing hands to relax instantly from Ariel's throat. With a gentle sigh, the man who looked like a strange blending of John Farrington and Ahmad Yazij fell to the floor.

Rod gave all his attention to Ariel. She was not seriously injured, and after a thirsty draft of water which tortured her bruised throat, she was able to speak.

"Is he unconscious, Rod? Really unconscious?"

"Yes."

"Then hurry! I have a dreadful task to perform, and you must help."

Without stopping to explain, she busied herself with the giant spectroscope-like appliance that Rod recognized as being the one which had come from Ahmad Yazij. After Ariel had made certain adjustments, she called to Rod.

"Will you lift him, Rod, to that high chair in front of the soul spectroscope?"

She was white-faced and so excited that her blue eyes were nearly black. Working under her directions, Rod placed the inert body in the chair, and rolled the chair into the exact center of a pentacle marked upon the floor with a reddish-brown substance suspiciously like dried blood.

"Don't step into the symbol," she warned, her voice high-pitched with ill-concealed dread.

As Rod observed her, he discovered that something in her voice, some half-perceived expression in her blue eyes, were proof that here was the old Ariel and not the soulless girl of the afternoon, who apparently lay lifeless in this very room.

At last everything was in readiness to Ariel's liking. She walked over to Rod and slipped her hand into his with almost child-like trust and simplicity.

"I'm sorry I had to force you to view what you're going to see, Rod. I asked you to come only because I need you so."

And this was the girl in the image of her who that afternoon had denied writing him to come!

ROD pressed the hand in his. "I'm with you to the last drop of my blood, Ariel. And I'm ready for anything that is to take place, for I know that we're both experiencing what was never intended for normal human beings to see."

"You'll not be harmed," she promised, "if you keep hold of your nerves and your reason."

She swung into place the long tube which somewhat resembled the collimator on the ordinary spectroscope. Instead of the usual lens in the end, the tube was fitted with an arrangement of silvery wires twisted into a geometrical pattern

so singular that Rod felt a creeping of his scalp when he looked at it. Only a moment of gazing gave him the sensation that those insanely angled wires were cutting through his flesh, through his very mind, until, tearing his eyes away, he realized that he had had a glimpse of forms stolen from some elder world, perhaps from another dimension of space and time.

"Go to the other end of the room, Rod, and watch."

Rod obeyed, his eyes again seeking the silver-wired tube that was focused on John Farrington's body, which now was animated with returning consciousness.

Ariel did something to the soul spectroscope which caused a blinding white light to pour from the silver wires. The radiance, in long pale beams, was interlaced in the same dreadful pattern that the wires made. Reaching out to the convulsed body of John Farrington, the rays seemed to slash through him like knives of steel.

Suddenly from the man's open mouth poured a stream of black smoke so foul that both Rod and Ariel clapped their hands to their mouths. The stench of Ahmad Yazij; instantly Rod recognized it, sensing it issuing from a foul source rotten with age and corruption. The smoke began to shape itself into a form, a man; a black wraith with features and eyes that were readily recognizable. Rod and Ariel clung together, for Ahmad Yazij's shade hovered before them, still attached to John Farrington's mouth. The features grew plainer, until the hate they revealed seemed to have deadly force.

With an enormous effort, Ariel recovered herself. Close to the pentacle marked on the floor she went, chanting in bad Arabic. As she approached, the hate on the wraith's face changed to fear. With one last burst of courage, Ariel reached out a finger and touched the living shadow. Instantly it detached itself from John Farrington's mouth, floated up for another foot or two, and burst like a bubble.

Ariel fainted, and the two men rushed to her aid.

"Ariel! Daughter!" groaned John Farrington, completely recovered. "My brave little girl." He gathered her into his arms.

Ariel did not remain unconscious more than a moment. Strength returned to her almost immediately. She sat up and gasped.

"Quick, Father! Let's burn the room and everything in it."

Leaping to her feet, she began tumbling the books from the shelves, tearing out leaves and scattering them in heaps.

"Wait, Daughter." John Farrington hesitated, and his worn face paled to a ghastlier hue. "There is something not in this room which—must be destroyed. Rod?"

The eyes of the two men met and clung in horrible, unspoken understanding.

"Get me some sheets, Ariel," the older man went on.

In a few moments, bearing a broad board taken from the broken door, the two men were plunging into the night, following the lake path that led to the thing in the mud.

John Farrington would not let Rod touch the poor, befouled body.

"I'll take my just share of punishment, Rod. Hand me the sheets—and don't look."

Rod turned his head and tried to close his ears to the sucking sounds made by a body leaving its muddy bed. His nostrils quivered with the odor of death; the odor that hung between the two men throughout that dreadful return walk.

Not once did the young man glance at the sheeted thing bound to the board. Even after they had entered the house and deposited their burden on the laboratory floor, he refused to look. Near the broken door he stood while John Farrington and Ariel broke bottles of chemicals and scattered their contents. He heard the scratch of a match.

"Get out—quick!" shouted John Farrington.

THEY were no sooner outside than explosions began shaking the house. At a safe distance they watched the flames lick the sky, roaring higher after each explosion.

"Thank God for fire!" John Farrington said grimly. "Those half-real bodies will be consumed like paper, and there will not be a trace left to tell the world that I tampered with what should have remained secret."

Not until the three had entered Rod's car parked far from the house did John Farrington allay Rod's curiosity. While the house burned, the high-reaching flames painting the night with quivering red, the two men talked.

"I am prepared to understand anything you tell me, Judge. I saw the two Stowall Vaynces. I saw three Ariels. They were as real as my own flesh. And, God help me, Judge! I—I saw Ahmad Yazij look out of your eyes."

The other placed a comforting hand on his knee.

"It's all right now, boy. I'm your old friend again." After a pause, he went on, in a brisker tone of voice. "Rod, have you ever been surprized at your own actions and decisions, which made you feel almost as though a stranger inside you were directing your mind?"

"We're all like that, Judge, aren't we? We've got to fight ourselves, beat ourselves, make ourselves think, act, and live decently."

"But are you sure we are fighting ourselves? Has it ever occurred to you that your body might be like a house sheltering a large, quarrelsome family?"

Rod laughed. "I've felt like that at times."

"And that's what I—what Ahmad Yazij proved. He started his work nearly two thousand years ago, and could never have completed it had he not possessed enough occult power to pass himself on to younger, stronger bodies, which he forced to carry on the work of his will.

"The human body is only a house, Rod, equipped with various natural devices called senses which give the dweller or the dwellers contacts with consciousness. There is one master of the house, which is your true self, but there are many interlopers, tramps that come from outside; wandering, bodiless souls seeking a home. Sometimes one, sometimes the other, takes ascendency over all the rest, and we call the phenomenon 'changing mood.'

"At least three hundred years ago, Ahmad Yazij started out to find a way to cast out all the other dwellers of a body except himself, but not until modern science began to be developed did he make much headway."

Rod broke in nervously. "Terrible thought, that: his coming up to the present time through all the other ages of ignorance and dawning knowledge."

"I think it rather sublime, Rod; that is, if he hadn't misused his power. But he was inherently evil. To go on, though: he did not discover the soul spectroscope until he was in the incarnation that we knew, the shriveled, hideous Arab." He paused and breathed audibly for several moments. "The soul spectroscope, Rod. It's a devilish mongrel, spawned from

modern science wedded to occultism, for separating souls as the prism spectroscope separates the different radiations from a luminous source. It shows up the tramps that have stolen into a body, and, at the operator's will, casts them out."

"But, Judge," Rod interrupted, "I can't forget that the—the extra bodies I saw were of flesh and blood. There was Stowall Vaynce and—and Ariel——"

"Yes, they were real, half-real; creatures made up of matter of a sort. But do we know so very much about matter, after all? Matter and energy are the same in the last analysis. Ahmad Yazij, in the form of the Arab we knew, having acquired a knowledge of modern science to add to his ancient lore of occultism and magic, discovered that it was possible, when separating souls, to split off material atoms from the living body to clothe the tramp with flesh. Don't be too shocked. Your own living body is doing that constantly, casting off its own atoms, renewing itself at least every seven years. What Ahmid Yazij did was to steal only enough living atoms to make a second body of similar mass, but of less density."

"And that is why the dead thing called Stowall Vaynce weighed only forty-five pounds?"

"Yes; and it was the reason why he was dead. For he was the original Vaynce, you know, who had been forced to give up too much of his living substance. The one that came back was one of the poor devil's harmless body interlopers. Not until Yazij got into my body, younger and more vigorous than his, and with a mind perhaps more carefully educated, did he discover how to materialize souls without destroying the parent-body. Using me, he separated two interlopers from Ariel. And when I succeeded in beating him back and getting ascendency, I killed both. It was all too dreadful; please comprehend. To retaliate, he tried to kill the real Ariel. Many times. You saw one occasion. But it's all right now; he's gone."

Rod looked back at the burning house and shuddered. "Gone? Are you sure?"

"I am sure. Ariel cast him out without giving him flesh; cast him unfleshed from a living body. Had he passed out of a dead body, as he did when he was executed, he could seize another home. But now he is a homeless wanderer in space and time."

"But have you any assurance that he can never come back—that he can never seize another home, as you call it?"

John Farrington paused long before answering.

"I can't be sure—too sure," he said. "I only know that he can never take my body again. I know how to guard against him now."

A LONG silence fell, for the three of them were now watching the final spectacle of the burning house, nearly consumed by the flames. The old building had crashed in, half smothering the fire, so that black smoke belched up in vast clouds.

"Look!" screamed Ariel. "Look!"

Her pointing finger picked out the topmost peak of the smoke cloud, swaying against the red-lighted sky. It had formed a colossal man, his feet planted in the fire, his head high above the tree tops. The features were plainly visible, sculptured from fire-painted smoke.

"Is it smoke?" Ariel quavered. "No, no! Daddy, it's looking at us, looking——"

But John Farrington, not heeding her, got out of the car quietly, holding his arms wide, while he chanted in Arabic.

Suddenly the black form writhed high into the air and sailed out over the lake, still intact, until a sudden gust of wind caught it, tore it to fragments, and sent the fragments scattering, to be swallowed by the black night.

A Sprig of Rosemary

By H. WARNER MUNN

A tender story about a skinflint whose heart had turned to ice, and how it was softened after his death

WHEN I was a boy in the little village of Pequoig, which is hidden away in a fold of northwestern Massachusetts' hilly country, I remember distinctly an old man with a long white beard seen often on the streets and side lanes, always alone.

Stump, stump, stump, would go his peg-leg on the plank sidewalks as he strode along, with occasionally a sharp rattle of his cane along the pickets of the bordering fences.

We boys would cry to each other, "Watch out, here comes old Uncle Moses!" as he came in sight; then it was "Good day to you, Mr. Crockett!" to his face.

"Humph!" was his invariable reply, while his beard twitched as though about to throw off sparks and the gnarled hand clenched on his stout stick. Crack! Down it would come on the boards and off he would march, as though mightily insulted by our greeting. Stump, stump, stump, down the street; the hollow sound from the boarding coming back long after he was out of sight.

There was a tale in the village, that old Uncle Moses had not always been so morose, but his leg and his temper left him together, shot away by a cannon ball during the War of 1812.

He came home, hurt body and soul, eager for sympathy, limping straight to the door of the girl who had promised to be his bride when the war was over. For would he not be covered with glory and resplendent with glittering buttons and braid?

She took one long horrified look at him, standing there on her stoop, haggard, worn and crippled, leaning on his crutches, and she threw up her hands in dismay.

"Oh, Moses!" she cried, "I'd rather see you dead than coming home this way!" and slammed the door in his face.

Hurt and bewildered, his heart became like ice. From that day on, he had a kind word for no one; scowling, friendless, solitary, he stumped the streets of Pequoig and grew old alone.

The avuncular appellation came not from any kin of his, for he had no relatives. People called him Uncle because of his pawnbroker habits, and the name stuck. He loaned money at exorbitant interest and only upon excellent security. No tale of hard times could induce him to part with a penny due him, and many a curse was heaped upon his head from some poor soul thrust out into the wide world, sans house, property or hope.

Little by little, his fingers poked into every pie in Pequoig. Hardly an individ-

ual but was somehow in his debt, and one in debt to Uncle Moses rarely threw off his bonds.

The Civil War came and found many that took advantage of his pocketbook. Was the man with a family drafted? To old Uncle Moses then, for the hundred dollars to pay some single man to take his place.

Long after the war was over, some found their paid interest had totalled many times the principal, but the original sum loaned had not been abated a penny and they still owed old Uncle Moses one hundred dollars.

Mortgages, civic funds, rents, all came eventually to his eager clutching hands and there was a specter behind every man's bed as he tossed sleepless at night; for there was no pity in old Uncle Moses' stony heart for any living being.

By some he was looked upon with disgust and repulsion, by others with scorn, but underneath there was fear and hatred. And so time wore on.

As he grew older, the familiar stumping was heard less frequently, but the village dogs avoided him still, for there was power in his arm and a bite in his stick even in these late days when I came to know him.

At that time the pleasant custom of decorating graves on Memorial Day had recently come into fashion and was received with great enthusiasm and interest in Pequoig.

How well I remember seeing old Uncle Moses, standing with his weight on his peg-leg, looking on at the exercises in Highland Cemetery, mentally reckoning up the cost in good hard cash of all the flowers and wreaths laid out for the rains to destroy!

"Humph!" he grunted loudly. "Pagan superstition! Criminal waste of money!" and stumped away home.

This spread through the village on indignant tongues, and feeling ran high, so that there was talk of hooded men and tar and feathers. Nothing probably would have come of it in the end, for the fear of his power was too great, but there was no time given to decide the question.

THE very next morning, a debtor calling to pay money due, found old Uncle Moses dead in his chair, with his jaw dropped down and with his stick clutched firmly in his hand.

All over town there was silent rejoicing and if ever there was talk of a judgment sent straight from heaven, it was then, with Moses Crockett as a horrible example.

He had made no will, so even before his burial, a special town meeting was called to settle the question of his money. Almost unanimously it was voted to cancel all debts owing to his estate, bring back and settle again all townspeople who had been evicted through him, and use the remainder of his wealth in civic improvements.

It might be thought that this would have caused old Uncle Moses to turn over in his coffin, but calm and peaceful he lay, and was lowered into the grave. The ground leveled, a simple headstone placed and the sexton went away and left him alone as he would have chosen to be.

And while the town was glad, in a furtive shamefaced way, to see the last of him, a family living near the river were made happy for another reason.

Almost at the very instant that the spades patted down the last heap of loose earth in the Crockett lot, a girl baby was born to the Keltons.

She did not cry at first, like most babies, quickly afterward to fall asleep, but the beginning of her life was one of smiles.

"What shall we call her, Patience?"

said Abner, stroking his wife's hair with a horny, work-gnarled hand.

"We will call her Rosemary, dear," she answered weakly. "Rosemary. Rosemary Kelton. Isn't it lovely, Abner? She likes it, see how she smiles! Rosemary—that's for remembrance."

Then mother and daughter fell fast asleep and the great day was over.

The Keltons were one of the expatriated families brought back to better times by the death of old Uncle Moses. Soon they left the little shack by the river and returned into the village again to their old home.

One day Abner, his wife, and Rosemary, still in arms, went through the cemetery. They paused beside the grave of Moses Crockett for a moment. There were none of the usual eulogies of the dead upon his stone, merely a record of the dates of birth and death and his name; that was all.

"Poor old man!" said Mrs. Kelton. "I'm sorry for him. Nobody ever had a good word for him."

"Why should they?" flared up Abner. "He never did anything decent for anybody while he lived. In fact, the only good thing he ever did was die and get out of the way. Why, in a few more years, nobody in Pequoig would have been able to breathe unless they asked old Crockett's permission! Why, what's the matter with the child?"

For little Rosemary, whether frightened by her father's violent and angry tone, or for another reason, had commenced to cry bitterly and would not be comforted. Nor did she ever after that show such a liking for her father as had been her wont.

Another year crept by. Little Rosemary became "free, goin' on four," as she would proudly announce to all who begged to be informed.

Again on Memorial Day, the family went to Highland Cemetery to lay tributes upon ancestral resting-places.

Here in Pequoig, it has always been a custom that a thing worth doing at all is worth doing well, and the graves were loaded with flowers. This made it all the more noticeable, when they passed, as they were obliged to do, old Moses Crockett's grave.

It was bare and untended. The grass grew upon it uncut and in stiff clumps. The headstone had tipped drunkenly askew. The whole effect was that of desolation and neglect.

Rosemary looked at this depressing sight and hung back on her mother's hand.

"Mama! Why hasn't he got some flowers, too? Everybody else has got lots. Couldn't they give him a few?"

Mrs. Kelton looked at the grave and at her earnest-faced little girl. It did seem petty and spiteful to neglect this hard, unloved man, now that he was dead and gone.

"Give him this if you like, little daughter," she smiled, and broke off a little sweet-smelling sprig of blue flowers from the bouquet she carried. "It's rosemary, the pretty little shrub that we named you after. Put it there, dear. Now come, we will be late for the exercises."

"Why didn't he have any flowers, Mama?"

"Nobody loved him, darling. He didn't have any little girl like you to think about him and bring him flowers. He was all alone, you see."

"Poor old man! I'll be his little girl, Mama. I'll love him too and bring him flowers. Can't I be your little girl and his too, Mama?"

Tears sprang to her mother's eyes. She knelt and hugged her baby.

"Mother's thoughtful little daughter!

Of course you can. We will come here together, whenever you wish."

And there the matter ended for a while.

On Sundays Mrs. Kelton and Rosemary came to be regular visitors to the grave. It took on a different aspect.

The headstone was straightened, the grass neatly clipped, with seed sown to fill in the bare spots. Flowers were brought, fresh every week, whatever was in season at the time. A little bush had sprung up of itself upon the grave and one day Mrs. Kelton noticed that the spot it occupied must be directly over the old man's heart. It was rosemary.

THE year wore away to early fall. Goldenrod and fringed gentians appeared upon the grave and the little girl had formed the habit of going to the cemetery alone.

At first, she had wandered off and had been sought anxiously and with much concern, only to be found coming home with the calm explanation that having nothing else to do she had gone to the cemetery with flowers for old Uncle Moses.

Entering into the spirit of the play, Abner asked teasingly, "How did he like 'em? Did he thank ye for 'em, now?"

" 'Deed he did, Papa. He walked all the way here with me, too, but when he saw you he went back."

Abner's eyes almost popped from his head. He looked at his wife. She paled.

"Are you sure it was him, dear? How was he dressed?"

"Course 'twas him. He wore the same clothes he always wears. A black suit, big wide floppy hat, and his shoes are square at the toe.

"Poor man," she interrupted herself. "I mean 'shoe,' of course, because he's only got one foot. But he gets along real good with his peg-leg and his cane with the silver on the handle."

Over the child's head, the parents exchanged an awed look. She had described his garb to the life, and there was not a picture of Moses Crockett in the entire village of Pequoig!

"You have seen him before, then?" queried Abner.

"Course. Lots of times. We talk together every time I go up there."

"What about?"

"Oh, things," she replied, evasively. "He talks like he's glad to have me for a little girl."

Home again, the parents held a long colloquy, and arrived at the opinion that for the sake of her future sanity she must be kept away from the grave.

So, for a month, Highland Cemetery went unvisited by any Kelton, and grass grew up in clumps upon the grave and turned brown and sere in the chill nights of autumn.

Rosemary wept, but parental orders were stern. Then one day she was missing again and was found this time in the cemetery itself, radiant and happy. She was sitting by the headstone, talking rapidly, and appeared to be enjoying herself so much that Mrs. Kelton had not the heart to drag her away, but withdrew unobserved.

She came home in wild excitement. Old Uncle Moses, it appeared, had hit a big dog with his cane, when it jumped out at her as she was passing by Asa Higgins' house.

ABNER KELTON put on his hat and coat and went out without saying a word. In front of the Higgins house lay a dog. He did not remember ever having seen it about the village. Its back had been broken by a heavy blow and it was dead.

He went to Highland Cemetery in the

gathering dark. Standing before the grave he took off his hat.

"I'm much obliged, Mr. Crockett," he said, in a steady voice. "We think the world of that little girl."

Off in the depths of the wooded cemetery a whippoorwill sounded its plaintive, half-human cry. It came like a distant, sardonic laugh.

Abner started and put on his hat. "You poor, dumb fool!" he said to himself and strode home.

There is little more to tell.

Scarlet fever came to Pequoig before the first snow fell, and among the early victims was Rosemary Kelton. Parched and hot, she threw herself about upon her little bed in the agonies of delirium and nothing the anguished parents could do would bring her ease.

"I want Uncle Moses. Why don't Uncle Moses come to me?" she kept continually calling, and in desperation Abner Kelton went to Highland Cemetery with grief in his heart.

He knelt beside the grave.

"God," he said, very simply, "I ain't much on praying, but if you can let Moses Crockett come home with me for a spell, I'll be much obliged."

He paused; he felt there should be something more, but nothing would come to his mind. There was no sound to be heard but the wind dolefully whining through the leafless branches of the weeping willows, and soughing in the pines.

"Amen," he said, and stood up.

He walked out of the cemetery on the gravel path. He stopped and looked back; there was nothing to be seen, but he thought that he heard an irregular step on the gravel behind him.

He went on, down into the village. Far behind came a hollow stump, stump, stump, on the board walk, and faint but clear, a long rattle such as might be made by a stick dragged along the white-painted pickets of a fence.

Abner Kelton hurried home.

Stump, stump, stump, on the other side of the street.

Abner Kelton raised the latch of his gate and went into his house.

Lying on her bed, Rosemary smiled at him. "You sent him, didn't you, Papa? He loves you too now, Papa, because you came for him. He said he came before, but your hearts were against him and he couldn't get in. How good his cool hands feel on my forehead!"

She fell off into easy slumber, and that night the fever broke.

The parents spoke little of what had happened, but lying awake, they heard in the nights of sickness that followed, little noises that sounded like the slight tapping of a wooden leg set softly as might be in the taking of steps. And there was talking from below stairs. Sometimes they could swear they heard another voice besides that of their daughter, but so often as they went down to see, the other voice stopped and they found Rosemary muttering in her sleep.

So they gave up and left her with her unseen companion, for that she was in loving care could not be doubted.

But, although the fever was gone, Rosemary did not get well. Day by day she became more thin and pale, daily more feeble, until in spite of all their efforts she whispered one evening with a tired little sigh: "I love my Mama and Papa, and my Uncle Moses," and closed her eyes for ever, with the setting of the sun.

THAT was a night of sleepless sorrow. The grief-stricken mother sat by the beside of her first-born and mourned, dry-eyed and heartbroken.

Along toward morning, outraged nature had her way, and she dropped off to

sleep in her rocker. People afterward thought she dreamed what followed, but she always swore that a sudden noise brought her eyes open.

Rosemary was sitting up in the bed, holding out her arms to some one behind her mother. She was unable to turn, but she heard a deep, hearty, happy laugh, no more like the surly tones that she remembered from Moses Crockett than anything in the world.

"I knew you would come back for me, Uncle Moses," crowed the little girl, with a lovely smile. "I waited for you. I just couldn't go by myself. It was so far and so dark."

The person behind Mrs. Kelton laughed again.

"Come," said the hearty, good-humored tones. "Come, darling, we will go together. Did you think I would let the only one in the whole wide world who ever loved old Uncle Moses go alone?"

Then she saw that there were two Rosemarys, for one jumped out of bed and left the other lying there. The first Rosemary ran past the rocker.

"Here," said the happy voice, "put on your shoes. We are going to have a long journey, you know. So! There we are. Now, put this on the bed, then when your mother wakes up, she will know that everything is all right, and you will be waiting for her to follow us by and by."

The first Rosemary ran back to the bed and tucked something into the clasped fingers of the second.

"Now then, here we go. Come on. Up! You shall have a ride."

The door opened and closed again. At once Mrs. Kelton sprang up. She darted to the bed and took a tiny twig from between the fingers of the little girl who lay smiling there.

At last, tears blinded her eyes, but she heard a sound in the room and dashed them away. Abner stood at the foot of the stairs, looking sadly at her. She walked toward him.

"Oh, Abner," she began and paused, listening.

Stump, stump, stump, far away on the board sidewalk, and faint but clear, the sharp rattle of a stick on a picket fence.

She held up the sweet-smelling sprig before his face.

"Rosemary," she said unsteadily. "Rosemary. That's for remembrance."

The Last Drive

By CARL JACOBI

A short story of a grisly ride through a blizzard with a corpse

IT WAS a cold wind that whipped across the hills that November evening. There was snow in the air, and Jeb Waters in the cab of his jolting van shivered and drew the collar of his sheepskin higher about the throat. All day endless masses of white cumulus cloud had raced across a cheerless sky. They were gray now, those clouds, leaden gray, and so low-hanging they seemed to

lie like a pall on the crest of each distant hillock. Off to the right, stern and majestic, like a great parade of H. G. Wells' Martian creatures, marched the towers of the Eastern States Power lines, the only evidence here of present-day civilization. A low humming whine rose from the taut wires now as the mounting wind twanged them in defiance.

Through the windshield Jeb Waters scanned the sky anxiously.

"It's going to be a cold trip back," he muttered to himself. "Looks mighty like a blizzard startin'."

He gave the engine a bit more gas and tightened his grasp on the wheel as a sharper curve loomed up suddenly before him. For a time he drove in silence, his mind fixed only on the barrenness of the hills on all sides. Marchester lay thirty miles ahead, thirty long, rolling miles. Littleton was just behind. If there were going to be a storm, perhaps it would be wise to return and wait until morning before making the trip. It would be bad to get stuck out here tonight, especially with the kind of load he was delivering. Enough to give one the creeps even in the daytime.

Marchester with its few hundred souls, hopelessly lost in the hills, too small or perhaps too lazy to incorporate itself, had been passed by without a glance when the railroad officials distributed spurs leading from the main line. As a result all freight had to be trucked thirty miles across the country from Littleton, the nearest town on trackage. But there wasn't much freight, as the officials had suspected, and although Jeb Waters drove the distance only twice a week, he rarely returned with more than a single package.

Today, however, the load had stunned him with its importance. In the van, back of him, separated by only the wooden wall of the cab, lay a coffin, and in that coffin was the body of Philip Carr, Marchester's most promising son. Philip Carr—Race Carr they had called him because he was such a driving fool—was the only man who could have brought the town to fame. With his queer-looking Speed Empress, the racing-car which was a product of his own invention and three years' work, he had hoped to lower the automobile speed record on the sand track of Daytona Beach, Florida. He had clocked an unofficial 300 miles an hour in a practise attempt, and the world had sat up and taken notice.

On the fatal day, however, a tire had failed to stand the centrifugal force, and in a trice the car had twisted itself into a lump of steel. Philip Carr had been instantly killed. There was talk of burying him in Florida, but Marchester, his home town, had absolutely refused. And so the body had been shipped back to Littleton, the nearest point on rails, and Jeb Waters had been sent to bring it from there to Marchester.

JEB hadn't liked the idea. There was nothing to be afraid of, he knew, but somehow when he was alone in these Rentharpian Hills, even though he had known no other home since a child, he always felt depressed and anxious for companionship. A coffin would hardly serve to ease his mind.

The wind was mounting steadily, and now the first swirls of snow began to appear. The cab of the van was anything but warm. A corner of the windshield was broken out, and the rags Jeb had stuffed in the hole failed to keep out the cold.

Premature darkness had swooped down under the lowering clouds, and Jeb turned on the lights. The van was a very old one, and the lights worked on the magneto. As the snow became thicker and

thicker Jeb was forced to reduce his speed, and the lights, deprived of most of their current, dimmed to only a low dismal glow, illuminating but little of the road ahead.

Yet the miles rolled slowly by. The snow was piling in drifts now. It rolled across the hills, a great sweeping blanket of white, and swirled like powder through the crevices of the cab. And it was growing colder.

Frome's Hill, the steepest rise on the road, loomed up abruptly, and Jeb roared the rickety motor into a running start. The van lurched up the ascent, back wheels spinning in the soft snow, seeking traction. The engine hammered its protest. The transmission groaned as if in pain. Up, up climbed the truck until at length it reached the very top.

"Now it's clear sailing," said Jeb aloud.

But he had spoken too soon. With a sigh as if the feat had been too great, the motor lapsed into sudden silence. The lights blinked out, and there was only the gray darkness of the hills and the swishing of the snow on the sides of the cab.

For a full moment Jeb sat there motionless as the horror of the situation fell upon him. Snowbound with a corpse! Twenty miles from the nearest habitation and alone with a coffin! A cold sweat burst out on his forehead at the realization of the predicament.

But he was acting like a child. It was ridiculous to let his nerves run away with him like that. If he could only keep from freezing there would be no danger. In the morning when it was found he hadn't reached Marchester the people would send help. Probably Ethan would come. Old Ethan. He would come in that funny sleigh of his. And he would say:

"Well Jeb, howdja like spending the night with a dead 'un?"

And then they would both laugh and drive back to town. . . . But that was tomorrow. Tonight there was the storm —and the corpse.

He set the spark, got out, and cranked the engine. But he did it half-heartedly. He knew by the tone of the engine when it had stopped that it would be a long time before it would resume revolutions.

At length he resigned himself to his plight, returned to the cab and tried to keep warm. But the cab was old and badly built. The wind blew through chinks and holes in great drafts, and snow sifted down his neck. It suddenly occurred to him that the back part of the van, which had been repaired recently, would give better protection against the blizzard than the cab. There were robes back there too, robes used to keep packages from being broken. If only the coffin weren't there! One couldn't sleep next to a coffin.

Another thought followed. Why not put the coffin in the cab? There was nothing else in the van, and he would then have the back of it to himself. He could lie down too and with the robes manage to keep warm somehow.

In a moment his mind was made up, and he set about to accomplish his task. It was hard, slow work. The coffin was heavy, the cab small and the steering-post in the way. Finally by shoving it in end up he managed it successfully, and then going to the back of the van, he went in, closed the door, rolled up like a ball in the robes and lay down to sleep.

SLEEP proved elusive. He stirred restlessly, listening to the sounds of the storm. Occasionally the truck trembled as a stronger gust of wind struck it. Occasionally he could hear the mournful Eolian whine of the power lines. Powdery snow rustled along the roof of the van. And the iron exhaust pipe cracked loudly as the heat left it. Minutes dragged by, slowly, interminably.

And then suddenly Jeb Waters sat bolt upright. Whether or not he had dozed off into a fitful sleep he did not know, but at any rate he was wide awake now.

The van was moving! He could hear the tires crunching in the snow, could feel the slight swaying as the car gained momentum. He leaped to his feet and pressed his eyes against the little window that connected the back of the van with the cab.

For a moment he saw nothing. A strip of black velvet seemed pasted before the glass. Then the darkness softened. A soft glow seemed to form in the cab, and vaguely he seemed to see the figure of a man hunched over the wheel in the driver's position.

The van was going faster now. It creaked and swayed, and the wheels rumbled hollowly. Yet strangely enough there was no sound of the engine. Jeb hammered on the little pane of glass.

"Hey!" he cried. "Get away from that wheel! Stop!"

The figure seemed not to hear. With his hands grasping the wheel tightly, elbows far out, shoulders hunched low, he appeared aware of nothing but the dark road ahead of him. Faster and faster sped the van.

Frantically Jeb rammed his clenched fist through the window. The glass broke into a thousand fragments.

"Do you hear?" he cried. "Stop, blast you! Stop!"

The man turned and leered at him. Even in the half-glow Jeb recognized the features — that deathly white face, the black, glassy eyes.

"Oh, my God," he screamed. *"It's Philip Carr!"* His voice rose to a hysterical laughing sob. His hands trembled as he clutched the careening walls, striving to keep his balance.

"Philip Carr," he shouted. "You're dead. You're dead, do you hear? You can't drive any more."

A horrible gurgling laugh came from the man at the wheel. The figure bent lower as if to urge the van to a greater speed. And the van answered as if to a magic touch. On it raced into the storm, rocking and swaying like a thing accursed. Snow swirled past in great white clouds. The wind howled in fanatical accompaniment.

Jeb plunged his arm through the broken window and clawed for the throat of the driver.

"Stop!" he screamed. And then he gurgled in horror as his hands touched the ice-cold skin.

Suddenly with a lurch the van left the road and leaped toward the blacker shadows of a gully. A giant tree, its branches gesticulating wildly in the wind, reared up just ahead.

There came a crash!

* * * * * * *

"IT's odd," said the coroner, and frowned.

Old Ethan scratched his chin.

"It 'pears," he said, "as if that danged van engine went and stopped right on the top of that hill. Then Jeb, he musta gone into the back of the van to keep warm, and durin' the night the wind started the thing a-rollin'. It come tearin' down the hill, jumped into this here gully and ran smash agin the tree. That's the way I figure it. Poor old Jeb!"

"Yes," replied the coroner, "but there doesn't seem to be the slightest injury on Jeb's body. Apparently he died of heart-failure. And the corpse of Philip Carr! . . . The crash might have ripped open the coffin. But that doesn't explain why the body although set in rigor mortis is in a sitting position. The way his arms are extended, it looks almost as though he were driving once more."

Nellie Foster

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

A brief tale of a woman who would not stay quiet in her grave

MRS. KRAFT came hurriedly from the house, closed the white gate behind her, and half ran across the dusty street. With one hand she held her long skirts clear of the walk; with the other she pressed a white handkerchief tightly to her lips. Her dark eyes were fixed on the green and white house at the end of the block, almost hidden in the shade of overhanging elms of great age.

The gate stood open, and Mrs. Kraft stepped quickly on to the lawn, forgetting to close the gate behind her. She avoided the low veranda, going around the side of the house, and entered the kitchen through the open door at the back.

Mrs. Perkins was leafing through her recipe book when the shadow of Mrs. Kraft momentarily darkened her door. She looked up and said, "How do, Mrs. Kraft? You're out early this morning." She smiled.

Mrs. Kraft did not smile. She stood quite still, her handkerchief still pressed tightly against her mouth, nodding curtly to acknowledge her neighbor's greeting.

Mrs. Perkins looked at her oddly. "What is it, Mrs. Kraft?" she asked a little nervously.

Mrs. Kraft took the handkerchief away from her mouth, clenching it tightly in her hand, and said, "It happened again last night."

Mrs. Perkins put her recipe book aside suddenly. "How do you know?" she asked breathlessly. Her eyes were unnaturally wide. "How do you know, Mrs. Kraft?"

Her visitor opened her hand jerkily. "It was my niece this time. She saw the woman, too. I didn't want Andrew to let the child go out last night, but she would have her way. She wanted to go to her Aunt Emmy's."

"Beyond the cemetery," breathed Mrs. Perkins. "But she came back before dark, surely?"

Mrs. Kraft shook her head. "No. At dusk, just before the street lights went on. The woman was there, standing in the road. The child was afraid, even when the woman took her hand and walked along with her."

"What did she do? Oh, I hope nothing serious happened!"

"The same as before. The woman kissed the child, and the little one went to sleep. This morning she is so weak, she couldn't get up. Loss of blood, the doctor said."

Mrs. Perkins clasped her hands helplessly in her lap. "What can we do, Mrs. Kraft? Nobody would believe us if we said what this must be."

Mrs. Kraft made an impatient movement with her head. Then she leaned forward, her dark eyes shining, speaking in a low voice. "The child knew the woman."

Mrs. Perkins started. "It wasn't . . . wasn't——"

Mrs. Kraft nodded. "Nellie Foster—not yet a month dead!"

Mrs. Perkins wove her fingers together

nervously. She had gone pale, and her uneasiness was more pronounced than her visitor's.

"My niece is the third child, Mrs. Perkins. We must do something, or it will continue—and the children may die."

Mrs. Perkins said nothing. Her visitor went on.

"I'm going to do something, if you won't," she said. "Tonight I'm going to watch at the cemetery. There won't be another child to be taken like that."

"I don't know what I can do," murmured Mrs. Perkins quietly. "I get so nervous. If I saw Nellie Foster, I'd probably scream."

Mrs. Kraft shook her head firmly. "That would never do," she admitted.

"Did you go to the minister?" asked Mrs. Perkins.

Mrs. Kraft pressed her lips tightly together before she spoke. Then she said, "He said there were no such things. He said only ignorant people believed in vampires."

Mrs. Perkins shook her head in disapproval.

"He asked me how Nellie Foster could have become one, and I told him about the cat jumping over her coffin. He smiled, and wouldn't believe me." Mrs. Kraft stood up, nodding her head. "And I know it's Nellie Foster, because I was out to the cemetery this morning, and there were three little holes in the grave —like finger holes, going 'way down deep."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. But I'll watch, and I won't let her get out of the cemetery."

"Maybe the men could do something," suggested Mrs. Perkins hopefully.

"It would be worse than telling the minister, to go to them. They'd laugh. If he wouldn't believe it, they wouldn't," said Mrs. Kraft scornfully. "It will be left for some one else to do."

"I wish I could help," said Mrs. Perkins.

Mrs. Kraft looked at her reflectively, her eyes hardening. "You can, if you want."

Mrs. Perkins nodded eagerly.

"If I'm to go to the cemetery, I've got to be protected."

The other woman nodded. Mrs. Kraft pursed her lips firmly. "I need something," she went on, "and I'd like to use that blessed crucifix your son brought from Belgium, the one Cardinal Mercier gave him, a very old one, he said it was."

For a moment Mrs. Perkins wavered. Her lips faltered a little. Then, quailing before the stern eyes of Mrs. Kraft, she moved noiselessly to get the crucifix.

Mrs. Kraft attached it to a black ribbon around her neck, and tucked it out of sight in the bosom of her black dress. Then she rose to go.

"I'll tell you what happened in the morning, Mrs. Perkins. And if I don't come"—Mrs. Kraft faltered—"then something's wrong. And if I'm not here before noon, you'd best go to the cemetery, perhaps, and look around a bit."

Mrs. Perkins quavered, "You don't think she'd go for you, Mrs. Kraft?"

"They don't only go for children, Mrs. Perkins. I've read about them. If they can't die, they have to have blood—and we've blood, too."

Nodding her head sagely, Mrs. Kraft went from the house, her lips still pursed, her hand still tightly clenching her handkerchief.

MRS. KRAFT sat on the back porch with Mrs. Perkins a little after sunrise the next morning. The dew was not yet gone; it hung heavy on the hollyhocks and delphinium. The early sun-

light threw long shadows across the garden.

Mrs. Kraft was talking. "I got there just after sunset and hid behind the oak tree near old Mr. Prince's grave, and watched for Nellie Foster. When the moon came up, I saw something on her grave, something gray. It was like a part of some one lying there, and it was moving. It was misty, and I couldn't see it well. Then I saw a hand, and then another, and after that a face." Mrs. Kraft coughed a little; Mrs. Perkins shuddered.

"And then?" prompted Mrs. Perkins. She leaned forward, fascinated.

"It was Nellie Foster," Mrs. Kraft went on in a low voice. "She was crawling out of her grave. I could see her plainly then in the moonlight. It was Nellie, all right. I'd know her anywhere. She pulled herself out—it was like mist coming out of those holes in the grave, those little holes."

"What did you do?"

"I think I was scared. I didn't move. When the mist stopped coming there was Nellie standing on the grave. Then I ran toward her, holding the cross in my hand. Before I could reach her, she was gone."

Mrs. Kraft's face twisted suddenly in pain. "This morning they found the little Walters girl, like the others. I should have watched beside the grave. I should have stopped Nellie. I shouldn't have let her get out. It's my fault that the little Walters girl was attacked. My fault. I could have stopped Nellie. I could have watched there all night. I should have gone forward before she got out of the grave."

She rose suddenly, disturbed. "I'm going now, Mrs. Perkins. Let me keep the cross a little longer. I think I'll need it tonight."

Mrs. Perkins nodded, and her visitor was gone, her black-clothed figure walking quickly across the road. Mrs. Perkins watched her go, wondering about Nellie Foster, hoping that soon something might be done to stop her coming from her grave. There was her own little Flory to think about. What if some day Nellie Foster should see her, and then they would find little Flory Perkins like that? Mrs. Perkins shuddered. "Oh Lord, give me power to do something," she thought. "Let me help." Then she thought, "And Nellie Foster was always such a nice girl! It's hard to believe." She went into the house, shaking her head.

She had intended to go over to see Mrs. Kraft just after dinner, to talk about doing something, but a sudden storm struck the town, and for six hours it raged, pouring rain, darkening the town. For six hours only lightning flashes brightened the darkness. Then, at seven o'clock, the sky cleared abruptly, and the setting sun came out to finish the July day in a blaze of rainbow glory.

MRS. PERKINS finished washing the supper dishes, saw her Flory go out to play until dark, and finally started for Mrs. Kraft's. Going out to the sidewalk, she saw an elderly man coming quickly down the street. Mr. Shurz, she thought. Seems in a hurry, too. She pondered this. Something on his mind, likely. She purposely slowed her pace.

At the gate she met him. He would have gone past had he not spied her suddenly. Then he stopped breathlessly. "Miz' Perkins, have y' heard the news?"

Mrs. Perkins shook her head. "Lightning strike somewhere?" she asked.

"If only 'twere that, Miz' Perkins, ma'am." The old man shook his head dolefully. "The like of this we've never had in this town before, 'slong as I can remember. This afternoon during the

storm, some one got into the cemetery and dug open Nellie Foster's grave!"

Mrs. Perkins leaned over the gate, her hands tightly clenched on the pointed staves. "What?" she whispered hoarsely. "What's that you say, Mr. Shurz?"

" 'Tis just as I say, Miz' Perkins. Some one dug into Nellie Foster's grave, in all that storm, too, and opened the coffin, Miz' Perkins, ma'am, *and druv a stake clean through her body!*"

"A stake . . . through her body!" She shook her head. "Just what Mrs. Kraft said should be done," she murmured to herself.

Mr. Shurz did not hear her. He nodded vehemently. "Clean through, Miz' Perkins, ma'am. And a powerful lot of blood there were, too; 'twas a surprize to Doctor Barnes. A strange, unnatural thing, the doctor said."

"But surely the coffin was covered again?"

"Partly, only partly, Miz' Perkins. Seems the man got scared away."

"Oh . . . it was a man, then?"

Mr. Shurz looked at her, smiling vacuously. " 'Course 'twas a man, Miz' Perkins."

"He was seen, then?"

Mr. Shurz shook his head. "Oh, no, he wasn't seen. No, ma'am, he wasn't seen. Too slick for that, he was."

Mrs. Perkins felt her heart pounding in her breast. She felt suddenly that she was stifling. She opened the gate and stepped onto the sidewalk at Mr. Shurz's side, walking along with him. She did not hear what he was saying.

Mrs. Kraft was out on her lawn. She was pale, dishevelled. Mrs. Perkins was thinking, I hope he won't notice anything, I hope he won't notice anything. Mr. Shurz stopped with Mrs. Perkins. Mrs. Perkins could hardly bring herself to say, "How do, Mrs. Kraft?"

Then, as Mr. Shurz was repeating his story to Mrs. Kraft, Mrs. Perkins' eyes fell on the stain of red clay on Mrs. Kraft's hands, a stain at first difficult to wash away. She wanted to look away from Mrs. Kraft's rough hands, but she could not. Then she noticed that Mr. Shurz had seen the stain, too.

"Been digging in red clay, have you, Miz' Kraft?" He laughed hollowly. "Looks mighty like that clay they dug away off Nellie Foster's coffin, now." He wagged his head.

Mrs. Perkins felt faint. She heard him talking, rambling on. Deep down in her she wanted to say something, anything, to change the subject, but she could not. Then she heard Mrs. Kraft speaking.

"I've been digging in the garden, Mr. Shurz," she smiled politely, despite her white, drawn face. "This stain is mighty hard to get off your hands."

Mrs. Perkins heard herself saying, "That's right. I warned Mrs. Kraft not to touch the red clay when we were digging up her sweet william right after the storm, but she wouldn't listen." She was thinking, "Oh Lord, don't let him look into the garden; don't let him see how black the ground is there."

Mr. Shurz grinned broadly and shrugged his shoulders. " 'Tis a good time to dig garden, after rain. Well, I must be off. We'll be catching him who meddled with Nellie Foster."

The women, standing one on each side of the fence, watched the old man go down the street. Mrs. Perkins was afraid to look at Mrs. Kraft. Then she heard her neighbor cough lightly, and turned.

Mrs. Kraft was holding out the crucifix. "I don't think I'll need it any more, Mrs. Perkins," she was saying.

THE EYRIE

A WORD of explanation is due our readers as to the change in dating of WEIRD TALES. Heretofore, like many other magazines, WEIRD TALES has been dated one month later than its actual sale date. For instance, our March issue went on sale February 1, and went off sale on the news stands March 1, to make way for our April issue. We have intended for a long time to change WEIRD TALES to a rational dating, and we are doing this with the current (June) issue. To effect this change in dating, the April issue was kept on the stands forty-five days. The May issue went on sale, therefore, on April 15 instead of April 1; and this issue (June) goes on sale June 1. Hereafter WEIRD TALES will go on sale each month on the first day of the month it bears date of. There is no advantage, to either the magazine or the readers, in pre-dating a magazine of fiction.

From the new Asiatic state of Manchukuo comes a letter from Mrs. Dakotawin E. Hayakawa of the Manchuria Medical University at Mukden: "Your magazine is superb and I shall say at once and without a moment's hesitation that your best writers are Seabury Quinn and Otis Adelbert Kline. I have *never* enjoyed any story as much as I am enjoying *Buccaneers of Venus*. Give us many more serials of this type. I have never written to the Eyrie before, and I am only writing today because I feel that I must add my few words of praise for Mr. Kline's thoroughly fascinating serial."

From New Brighton, New Zealand, comes this letter from G. W. Hockley: "Just a few lines to congratulate you on the continued high quality of the good old mag. Even though adverse exchange rates, sales taxes and what not, make the price here equivalent to 60 cents a copy, I manage to procure it somehow—it's my one solace in these times of depression. Congratulations on changing your reprint policy. No more dreary drivel like *Frankenstein*, please! I was tickled to death to be able to read *The Night Wire* and *The Cats of Ulthar*. Keep up the good work—only reprints from back issues of WEIRD TALES. What has happened to H. P. Lovecraft? Surely the master of the weird tale has not deserted your pages for keeps! His stories are all the more appreciated, maybe, because of their scarcity, but don't make us wait too long. Robert E. Howard has excelled himself in *The Scarlet Citadel*. I have never read a poor, or even medium, R. E. H. story yet; and this one certainly rang the bell. Howard has that rare quality of transporting the reader completely away from this mundane old earth and opening up imaginative vistas utterly strange and alien."

"I am thrilled at the news of the WEIRD TALES broadcasts and send best wishes for their magnificent success," writes Frank Harrison Cunningham from Roanoke,

Virginia. "I hope some of the stories will be filmed. Karloff would have been a wow in Howard's *Skull-face.*"

Miss E. Myers, of Brooklyn, writes to the Eyrie: "For a good many years I have been a very willing addict and devoted reader of WEIRD TALES. It is my urgent plea to you not to publish any more so-called weird-scientific stories. Truly, they are not weird, and consequently they have no place in your unique magazine. Please print more stories of the kind that give us goose-flesh up and down our spines, make us afraid of the dark and of going to bed. Make us wonder fearfully whether our next-door neighbor is not a vampire—after all his ears are long and tapering and his teeth long and pointed, and his lips are unnaturally red. And what are those strange sounds emanating from his room? Is he in the midst of some dreadful Black Mass? Please heed this lengthy plea."

Writes E. M. Barnett, of Plymouth, Massachusetts: "Not in many moons have I read a story as unusual and gripping as Carl Jacobi's masterpiece in the April issue of WEIRD TALES: *Revelations in Black.* I am not an old-time reader of your magazine, since only about a year ago was I fortunate enough to discover it on the news stand. Since then I have bought the magazine regularly and enjoyed it tremendously. Now I must write to say how much I liked the story, *Revelations in Black.* I hope there will be many more by Mr. Jacobi in the future."

"Is this a private fight, or can an interested bystander take off his coat and get in?" asks S. G. Gurwit, of Chicago. "I am referring to the differences of opinion regarding interplanetary yarns. Otis A. Kline certainly knows how to write this type of story and I am for having them. Everything out of the everyday routine of ordinary life is weird—and these stories can be classed as weird. They certainly hold the interest. When I start reading one, I forget this entire world we live in and go adventuring. By all means, keep them in WEIRD TALES. As for Hamilton, I've gotten many a thrill out of his stories. They're pretty nearly perfect examples of their kind. Robert E. Howard, too, is one of my favorites. What a smash he packs! All told, I like WEIRD TALES as it is. It's one of the magazines I really wait for each month with a sense of anticipation, knowing I'm going to get something different, new; something that will stir me up. Keep up the good work."

From River Falls, Wisconsin, comes a letter from Edward Walden: "I have never taken it upon myself to write to your reader's department before, but the April issue has without question more good stories in it than any month it has been my privilege to read. *Revelations in Black* was all that you labeled it to be, an utterly strange story and very good."

"Your April WEIRD TALES was undoubtedly the finest issue you have given us in months," writes B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts. "I wish especially to congratulate you on *Golden Blood* by Jack Williamson. This starts out as the finest serial you have ever published. I have always considered A. Merritt the greatest creator of fantastic stories, but if the remainder of *Golden Blood* is on a par with the first part, I shall have to admit that Williamson is a close second to Merritt. By all means keep him writing for you. Carl Jacobi found a new and unique angle to vampire stories in his *Revelations in Black.* This story was utterly different from the usual run of vampire stuff, and the finest of its kind I have ever seen anywhere. Then there was Price's *Return of Balkis,* which though not

equal to his *Girl from Samarcand,* still rang the bell; and Bassett Morgan's *Tiger Dust,* his best since *Bimini."*

Otto J. Precht, of Bellmore, Long Island, writes to the Eyrie: "Mr. Price's story, *The Return of Balkis,* merits a letter of commendation. The red-blooded character, Nureddin, warms the heart. But I regret very much that Mr. Price had to kill him. Why didn't he let him live so that he could rob more caravans?"

Jack Poltec, of Denver, writes to the Eyrie: "How do you do it? Not satisfied with publishing the only magazine of weird fiction that is interesting enough to survive the depression which has killed off so many magazines, here you go and land smack in the middle of the adventure magazine field with the MAGIC CARPET Magazine, which lays it over every magazine of its kind in pep, fascination, and power. Robert E. Howard's historical tales in the MAGIC CARPET are the equal of any stories ever published in the English language. Seabury Quinn's series about the swashbuckling vagabond-at-arms are even better than his de Grandin tales, and Bedford-Jones' stories are models of action and dash, with a thrill on every page. Of your two magazines, WEIRD TALES and the MAGIC CARPET Magazine, I prefer the latter. I regard it as the best fiction magazine on the stands today—and that's going some!"

By the time our next issue goes on sale, July 1, we hope to give you full details regarding the WEIRD TALES broadcasts. In the next twelve months, radio dramatizations of fifty-two stories from this magazine will be broadcast nationally, with your favorite motion picture actors and actresses in the casts. Watch your local papers for announcements of this thrilling series.

Readers, let us know what stories you like best in this issue of WEIRD TALES. Carl Jacobi's unusual vampire story, *Revelations in Black,* won first place in your affections among all the stories in our April issue. A close second in popularity was the first part of Jack Williamson's strange novel, *Golden Blood.*

My favorite stories in the June WEIRD TALES are:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)----------	Why?----------
(2)----------	----------

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in Weird Tales if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

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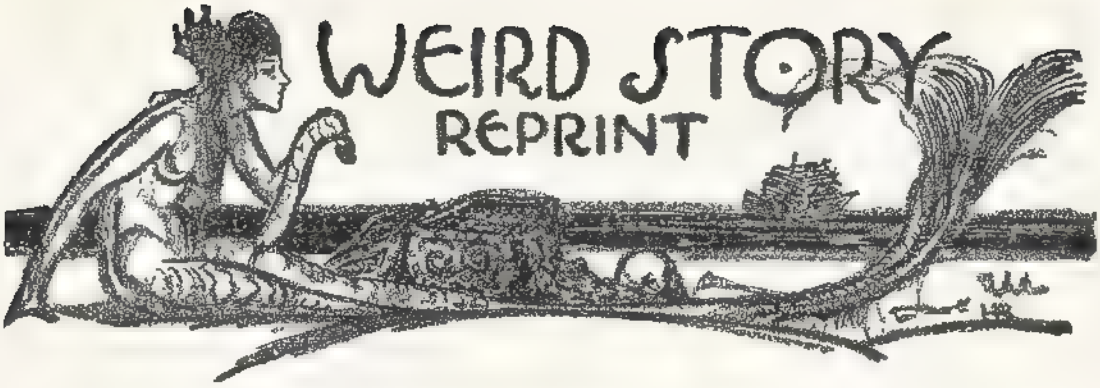


The Floor Above*

By M. HUMPHREYS

SEPTEMBER 17, 1922.—I sat down to breakfast this morning with a good appetite. The heat seemed over, and a cool wind blew in from my garden, where chrysanthemums were already budding. The sunshine streamed into the room and fell pleasantly on Mrs. O'Brien's broad face as she brought in the eggs and coffee. For a supposedly lonely old bachelor the world seemed to me a pretty good place. I was buttering my third set of waffles when the housekeeper again appeared, this time with the mail.

I glanced carelessly at the three or four letters beside my plate. One of them bore a strangely familiar handwriting. I gazed at it a minute, then seized it with a beating heart. Tears almost came into my eyes. There was no doubt about it—it was Arthur Barker's handwriting! Shaky and changed, to be sure, but ten years have passed since I have seen Arthur, or, rather, since his mysterious disappearance.

For ten years I have not had a word from him. His people know no more than I what has become of him, and long ago we gave him up for dead. He vanished without leaving a trace behind him. It seemed to me, too, that with him vanished the last shreds of my youth. For Arthur was my dearest friend in that happy time. We were boon companions, and many a mad prank we played together.

And now, after ten years of silence, Arthur was writing to me!

The envelope was postmarked Baltimore. Almost reluctantly—for I feared what it might contain—I passed my finger under the flap and opened it. It held a single sheet of paper torn from a pad. But it was Arthur's writing:

"Dear Tom:

"Old man, can you run down to see me for a few days? I'm afraid I'm in a bad way.

"Arthur."

Scrawled across the bottom was the address, 536 N. Marathon Street.

I have often visited Baltimore, but I can not recall a street of that name.

Of course I shall go. . . . But what a strange letter after ten years! There is something almost uncanny about it.

* From WEIRD TALES for May, 1923.

I shall go tomorrow evening. I can not possibly get off before then.

SEPTEMBER 18—I am leaving tonight. Mrs. O'Brien has packed my two suitcases, and everything is in readiness for my departure. Ten minutes ago I handed her the keys and she went off tearfully. She had been sniffling all day and I have been perplexed, for a curious thing occurred this morning.

It was about Arthur's letter. Yesterday, when I had finished reading it, I took it to my desk and placed it in a small compartment together with other personal papers. I remember distinctly that it was on top, with a lavender card from my sister directly underneath. This morning I went to get it. It was gone.

There was the lavender card exactly where I had seen it, but Arthur's letter had completely disappeared. I turned everything upside down, then called Mrs. O'Brien and we both searched, but in vain. Mrs. O'Brien, in spite of all I could say, took it upon herself to feel that I suspected her. . . . But what could have become of it? Fortunately I remember the address.

SEPTEMBER 19—I have arrived. I have seen Arthur. Even now he is in the next room and I am supposed to be preparing for bed. But something tells me I shall not sleep a wink this night. I am strangely wrought up, though there is not the shadow of an excuse for my excitement. I should be rejoicing to have found my friend again. And yet——

I reached Baltimore this morning at eleven o'clock. The day was warm and beautiful, and I loitered outside the station a few minutes before calling a taxi. The driver seemed well acquainted with the street I gave him, and we rolled off across the bridge.

As I drew near my destination, I began to feel anxious and afraid. But the ride lasted longer than I expected—Marathon Street seemed to be located in the suburbs of the city. At last we turned into a dusty street, paved only in patches and lined with linden and aspen trees. The fallen leaves crunched beneath the tires. The September sun beat down with a white intensity. The taxi drew up before a house in the middle of a block that boasted not more than six dwellings. On each side of the house was a vacant lot, and it was set far back at the end of a long narrow yard crowded with trees.

I paid the driver, opened the gate and went in. The trees were so thick that not until I was half-way up the path did I get a good view of the house. It was three stories high, built of brick, in fairly good repair, but lonely and deserted-looking. The blinds were closed in all of the windows with the exception of two, one on the first, one on the second floor. Not a sign of life anywhere, not a cat nor a milk-bottle to break the monotony of the leaves that carpeted the porch.

But, overcoming my feeling of uneasiness, I resolutely set my suitcases on the porch, caught at the old-fashioned bell, and gave an energetic jerk. A startling peal jangled through the silence. I waited, but there was no answer.

After a minute I rang again. Then from the interior I heard a queer dragging sound, as if some one was coming slowly down the hall. The knob was turned and the door opened. I saw before me an old woman, wrinkled, withered, and filmy-eyed, who leaned on a crutch.

"Does Mr. Barker live here?" I asked.

She nodded, staring at me in a curious way, but made no move to invite me in.

"Well, I've come to see him," I said.

"I'm a friend of his. He sent for me."

At that she drew slightly aside.

"He's upstairs," she said in a cracked voice that was little more than a whisper. "I can't show you up. Hain't been up a stair now in ten years."

"That's all right," I replied, and, seizing my suitcases, I strode down the long hall.

"At the head of the steps," came the whispering voice behind me. "The door at the end of the hall."

I climbed the cold dark stairway, passed along the short hall at the top, and stood before a closed door. I knocked.

"Come in." It was Arthur's voice, and yet—not his.

I OPENED the door and saw Arthur sitting on a couch, his shoulders hunched over, his eyes raised to mine.

After all, ten years had not changed him so much. As I remembered him, he was of medium height, inclined to be stout, and ruddy-faced, with keen gray eyes. He was still stout, but had lost his color and his eyes had dulled.

"And where have you been all this time?" I demanded, when the first greetings were over.

"Here," he answered.

"In this house?"

"Yes."

"But why didn't you let us hear from you?"

He seemed to be making an effort to speak.

"What did it matter? I didn't suppose any one cared."

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I could not get rid of the thought that Arthur's pale eyes, fixed tenaciously upon my face, were trying to tell me something, something quite different from what his lips said.

I felt chilled. Although the blinds were open, the room was almost darkened by the branches of the trees that pressed against the window. Arthur had not given me his hand, had seemed troubled to know how to make me welcome. Yet of one thing I was certain: He needed me and he wanted me to know he needed me.

As I took a chair I glanced about the room. It was a typical lodging-house room, medium-sized, with flowered wall-paper, worn matting, nondescript rugs, a wash-stand in one corner, a chiffonier in another, a table in the center, two or three chairs, and the couch which evidently served Arthur as a bed. But it was cold, strangely cold for such a warm day.

Arthur's eyes had wandered uneasily to my suitcases. He made an effort to drag himself to his feet.

"Your room is back here," he said, with a motion of his thumb.

"No, wait," I protested. "Let's talk about yourself first. What's wrong?"

"I've been sick."

"Haven't you a doctor? If not, I'll get one."

At this he started up with the first sign of animation he had shown.

"No, Tom, don't do it. Doctors can't help me now. Besides, I hate them. I'm afraid of them."

His voice trailed away, and I took pity on his agitation. I decided to let the question of doctors drop for the moment.

"As you say," I assented carelessly.

Without more ado, I followed him into my room, which adjoined his and was furnished in much the same fashion. But there were two windows, one on each side, looking out on the vacant lots. Consequently there was more light, for which I was thankful. In a far corner I noticed a door, heavily bolted.

"There's one more room," said Arthur,

as I deposited my belongings, "one that you'll like. But we'll have to go through the bathroom."

Groping our way through the musty bathroom, in which a tiny jet of gas was flickering, we stepped into a large, almost luxurious chamber. It was a library, well-furnished, carpeted, and surrounded by shelves fairly bulging with books. But for the chillness and bad light, it was perfect. As I moved about, Arthur followed me with his eyes.

"There are some rare works on botany——"

I had already discovered them, a set of books that I would have given much to own. I could not contain my joy.

"You won't be so bored browsing around in here——"

In spite of my preoccupation, I pricked up my ears. In that monotonous voice there was no sympathy with my joy. It was cold and tired.

When I had satisfied my curiosity we returned to the front room, and Arthur flung himself, or rather fell, upon the couch. It was nearly five o'clock and quite dark. As I lighted the gas, I heard a sound below as of somebody thumping on the wall.

"That's the old woman," Arthur explained. "She cooks my meals, but she's too lame to bring them up."

He made a feeble attempt at rising, but I saw he was worn out.

"Don't stir," I warned him. "I'll bring up your food tonight."

To my surprize, I found the dinner appetizing and well-cooked, and, in spite of the fact that I did not like the looks of the old woman, I ate with relish. Arthur barely touched a few spoonfuls of soup to his lips and absently crumbled some bread in his plate.

Directly I had carried off the dishes, he wrapped his reddish-brown dressing-gown about him, stretched out at full length on the couch, and asked me to turn out the gas. When I had complied with his request, I again heard his weak voice asking if I had everything I needed.

"Everything," I assured him, and then there was unbroken silence.

I went to my room, finally, closed the door, and here I am sitting restlessly between the two back windows that look out on the vacant lots.

I have unpacked my clothes and turned down the bed, but I can not make up my mind to retire. If the truth be told, I hate to put out the light. . . . There is something disturbing in the way the dry leaves tap on the panes. And my heart is sad when I think of Arthur.

I have found my old friend, but he is no longer my old friend. Why does he fix his pale eyes so strangely on my face? What does he wish to tell me?

But these are morbid thoughts. I will put them out of my head. I will go to bed and get a good night's rest. And tomorrow I will wake up finding everything right and as it should be.

SEPTEMBER 26—I have been here a week today, and have settled down to this queer existence as if I had never known another. The day after my arrival I discovered that the third volume of the botanical series was done in Latin, which I have set myself the task of translating. It is absorbing work, and when I have buried myself in one of the deep chairs by the library table, the hours fly fast.

For health's sake I force myself to walk a few miles every day. I have tried to prevail on Arthur to do likewise, but he, who used to be so active, now refuses to budge from the house. No wonder he is literally blue! For it is a fact that his complexion, and the shadows about his eyes and temples, are decidedly blue.

What does he do with himself all day? Whenever I enter his room, he is lying

on the couch, a book beside him, which he never reads. He does not seem to suffer pain, for he never complains. After several ineffectual attempts to get medical aid for him, I have given up mentioning the subject of a doctor. I feel that his trouble is more mental than physical.

SEPTEMBER 28—A rainy day. It has been coming down in floods since dawn. And I got a queer turn this afternoon.

As I could not get out for my walk, I spent the morning staging a general house-cleaning. It was time! Dust and dirt everywhere. The bathroom, which has no window and is lighted by gas, was fairly overrun with water-bugs and roaches. Of course I did not penetrate to Arthur's room, but I heard no sound from him as I swept and dusted.

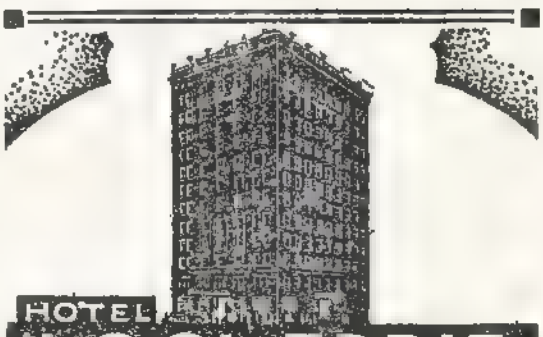
I made a good dinner and settled down in the library, feeling quite cozy. The rain came down steadily and it had grown so cold that I decided to make a fire later on. But once I had gathered my tablets and notebooks about me I forgot the cold.

I remember I was on the subject of the *Aster trifolium*, a rare variety seldom found in this country. Turning a page, I came upon a specimen of this very variety, dried, pressed flat, and pasted to the margin. Above it, in Arthur's handwriting, I read: *September 27, 1912.*

I was bending close to examine it, when I felt a vague fear. It seemed to me that some one was in the room and was watching me. Yet I had not heard the door open, nor seen any one enter. I turned sharply and saw Arthur, wrapped in his reddish-brown dressing-gown, standing at my very elbow.

He was smiling—smiling for the first time since my arrival, and his dull eyes were bright. But I did not like that smile.

(Please turn to page 794)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(Continued from preceding page)

In spite of myself I jerked away from him. He pointed at the aster.

"It grew in the front yard under a linden tree. I found it yesterday."

"Yesterday!" I shouted, my nerves on edge. "Good Lord, man! Look! It was ten years ago!"

The smile faded from his face.

"Ten years ago," he repeated thickly. *"Ten years ago?"*

And with his hand pressed against his forehead, he went out of the room still muttering, *"Ten years ago!"*

As for me, this foolish incident has preyed upon my mind and kept me from doing any satisfactory work. . . . *September 27.* . . . It is true, that was also yesterday—ten years ago.

OCTOBER 1—One o'clock. A cheerful morning this has been, the sun shining brightly, and a touch of frost in the air. I put in an excellent day's work in the library yesterday, and on the first mail this morning came a letter from Mrs. O'Brien. She says the scarab chrysanthemums are in full bloom. I must positively run up for a day before they are gone.

As I lighted a cigar after breakfast, I happened to glance over at Arthur and was struck by a change in him. For he *has* changed. I ask myself if my presence has not done him good. On my arrival he seemed without energy, almost torpid, but now he is becoming restless. He wanders about the room continually and sometimes shows a disposition to talk.

Yes, I am sure he is better. I am going for my walk now, and I feel convinced that in a week's time I shall have him accompanying me.

FIVE o'clock. Dusk is falling. O God! What has come over me? Am I the same man that went out of this house three hours ago? And what has happened? . . .

I had a splendid walk, and was striding homeward in a fine glow. But as I turned the corner and came in sight of the house, it was as if I looked at death itself. I could hardly drag myself up the stairs, and when I peered into the shadowy chamber, and saw the man hunched up on the couch, with his eyes fixed intently on my face, I could have screamed like a woman. I wanted to fly, to rush out into the clear cold air and run—to run and never come back! But I controlled myself, forced my feet to carry me to my room.

There is a weight of hopelessness at my heart. The darkness is advancing, swallowing up everything, but I have not the will to light the gas. . . .

Now there is a flicker in the front room. I am a fool; I must pull myself together. Arthur is lighting up, and downstairs I can hear the thumping that announces dinner. . . .

It is a queer thought that comes to me now, but it is odd I have not noticed it before. We are about to sit down to our evening meal. Arthur will eat practically nothing, for he has no appetite. Yet he remains stout. It can not be healthy fat, but even at that it seems to me that a man who eats as little as he does would become a living skeleton.

OCTOBER 5—Positively, I must see a doctor about myself, or soon I shall be a nervous wreck. I am acting like a child. Last night I lost all control and played the coward.

I had gone to bed early, tired out from a hard day's work. It was raining again, and as I lay in bed I watched the little rivulets trickling down the panes. Lulled by the sighing of the wind among the leaves, I fell asleep.

(Please turn to page 796)

Coming Next Month

EVEN as he spoke, the fire-beasts, with deep, bellowing roars that reverberated loudly, were charging through the flames toward the two heat-armored humans!

Jerry had no time to think, but acted instinctively. One of the fire-beasts was in advance of the rest, and Jerry brought up his long pointed steel staff and held it level until the monster's glassy eyes and gaping jaws were directly before him. Then he thrust the steel fiercely between the creature's jaws.

The steel staff drove through its open mouth into its body. The thing fell and thrashed wildly in the fires, while Jerry jerked his weapon out of it. As he faced the other charging fire-beasts the thought hammered in his brain that even though they were impervious to fire these creatures were not unkillable.

He thrust at the nearest of the onrushing fire-beasts, and as it fell too, the other creatures drew back, bellowing in rage. Jerry, eyeing them tensely with Helen still behind him, hoped that they would give over the attack, but they came on again. He felt his steel tear into another of the things, but this fire-beast was only wounded, and as it shied away with a terrific bellow, it tore the steel from Jerry's grasp.

The other fire-beasts were upon him and Helen—he heard the girl scream behind him—when they stopped and turned.

Two of the beasts had suddenly fallen in mid-charge. And now Jerry and Helen saw beyond them other and different black shapes approaching through the fires.

The newcomers were a dozen or more dark, *man-like* shapes! They did not wear heat-armor, yet did not seem more affected by the terrible fires than the fire-beasts. Like the fire-beasts, their bodies seemed of dark, stony flesh impervious to heat and flame. They were of human height and had human features, but their eyes were covered by a glassy protective film. They were clad in red harnesses of woven mineral-fibers and carried gun-like weapons of metal, which they were aiming at the fire-beasts.

As another fire-beast fell beneath the gun-weapon of these newly arrived fire-men, the other monsters lumbered off in flight.

Jerry and Helen stared at the human-shaped fire-men. Jerry had recovered his steel staff.

"Fire people!" Jerry Holt exclaimed. "People able to walk and live in these fires without armor or protection! Men and beasts living and fighting down in these fiery spaces of the volcano. Helen, it's——"

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July WEIRD TALES Out July 1

(Continued from page 794)

I awoke (how long afterward I can not say) to feel a cold hand laid on my arm. For a moment I lay paralyzed with terror. I would have cried aloud, but I had no voice. At last I managed to sit up, to shake the hand off. I reached for the matches and lighted the gas.

It was Arthur who stood by my bed—Arthur wrapped in his eternal reddish-brown dressing-gown. He was excited. His blue face had a yellow tinge, and his eyes gleamed in the light.

"Listen!" he whispered.

I listened but I heard nothing.

"Don't you hear it?" he gasped, and he pointed upward.

"Upstairs?" I stammered. "Is there somebody upstairs?"

I strained my ears, and at last I fancied I could hear a fugitive sound like the light tapping of footsteps.

"It must be somebody walking about up there," I suggested.

But at these words Arthur seemed to stiffen. The excitement died out of his face.

"No!" he cried in a sharp rasping voice. "No! It is nobody walking about up there!"

And he fled into his room.

For a long time I lay trembling, afraid to move. But at last, fearing for Arthur, I got up and crept to his door. He was lying on the couch, with his face in the moonlight, apparently asleep.

OCTOBER 6—I had a talk with Arthur today. Yesterday I could not bring myself to speak of the previous night's happening, but all of this nonsense must be cleared away.

We were in the library. A fire was burning in the grate, and Arthur had his feet on the fender. The slippers he wears are as objectionable to me as his dressing-gown. They are felt slippers, old and worn, and frayed around the edges as if they had been gnawed by rats. I can not imagine why he does not get a new pair.

"Say, old man," I began abruptly, "do you own this house?"

He nodded.

"Don't you rent any of it?"

"Downstairs—to Mrs. Harlan."

"But upstairs?"

He hesitated, then shook his head.

"No, it's inconvenient. There's only a peculiar way to get upstairs."

I was struck by this.

"By Jove! you're right. Where's the staircase?"

He looked me full in the eyes.

"Don't you remember seeing a bolted door in a corner of your room? The staircase runs from that door."

I did remember it, and somehow the memory made me uncomfortable. I said no more and decided not to refer to what had happened that night. It occurred to me that Arthur might have been walking in his sleep.

OCTOBER 8—When I went for my walk on Tuesday I dropped in and saw Doctor Lorraine, who is an old friend. He expressed some surprize at my run-down condition and wrote me a prescription.

I am planning to go home next week. How pleasant it will be to walk in my garden and listen to Mrs. O'Brien singing in the kitchen!

OCTOBER 9—Perhaps I had better postpone my trip. I casually mentioned it to Arthur this morning.

He was lying relaxed on the sofa, but when I spoke of leaving he sat up as straight as a bolt. His eyes fairly blazed.

"No, Tom, don't go!" There was terror in his voice, and such pleading that it wrung my heart.

"You've stood it alone here ten years," I protested. "And now——"

"It's not that," he said. "But if you go, you will never come back."

"Is that all the faith you have in me?"

"I've got faith, Tom. But if you go, you'll never come back."

I decided that I must humor the vagaries of a sick man.

"All right," I agreed. "I'll not go. Anyway, not for some time."

OCTOBER 12—What is it that hangs over this house like a cloud? For I can no longer deny that there *is* something—something indescribably oppressive. It seems to pervade the whole neighborhood.

Are all the houses on this block vacant? If not, why do I never see children playing in the street? Why are passers-by so rare? And why, when from the front window I do catch a glimpse of one, is he hastening away as fast as possible?

I am feeling blue again. I know that I need a change, and this morning I told Arthur definitely that I was going.

To my surprize, he made no objection. In fact, he murmured a word of assent and smiled. He smiled as he smiled in the library that morning when he pointed at the *Aster trifolium.* And I don't like that smile. Anyway, it is settled. I shall go next week, Thursday, the 19th.

OCTOBER 13—I had a strange dream last night. Or was it a dream? It was so vivid. . . . All day long I have been seeing it over and over again.

In my dream I thought that I was lying there in my bed. The moon was shining brightly into the room, so that each piece of furniture stood out distinctly. The bureau is so placed that when I am lying

(Please turn to page 798)

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NOW ON SALE

(Continued from preceding page)
on my back, with my head high on the pillow, I can see full into the mirror.

I thought I was lying in this manner and staring into the mirror. In this way I saw the bolted door in the far corner of the room. I tried to keep my mind off it, to think of something else, but it drew my eyes like a magnet.

It seemed to me that some one was in the room, a vague figure that I could not recognize. It approached the door and caught at the bolts. It dragged at them and struggled, but in vain—they would not give way.

Then it turned and showed me its agonized face. It was Arthur! I recognized his reddish-brown dressing-gown.

I sat up in bed and cried to him, but he was gone. I ran to his room, and there he was, stretched out in the moonlight asleep. It must have been a dream.

OCTOBER 15—We are having Indian Summer weather now—almost oppressively warm. I have been wandering about all day, unable to settle down to anything. This morning I felt so lonesome that when I took the breakfast dishes down, I tried to strike up a conversation with Mrs. Harlan.

Hitherto I have found her as solemn and uncommunicative as the Sphinx, but as she took the tray from my hands, her wrinkles broke into the semblance of a smile. Positively at that moment it seemed to me that she resembled Arthur. Was it her smile, or the expression of her eyes? Has she, also, something to tell me?

"Don't you get lonesome here?" I asked her sympathetically.

She shook her head. "No, sir, I'm used to it now. I couldn't stand it anywhere else."

"And do you expect to go on living here the rest of your life?"

"That may not be very long, sir," she said, and smiled again.

Her words were simple enough, but the way she looked at me when she uttered them seemed to give them a double meaning. She hobbled away, and I went upstairs and wrote Mrs. O'Brien to expect me early on the morning of the 19th.

OCTOBER 18—Ten a. m.—Am catching the twelve o'clock train tonight. Thank God, I had the resolution to get away! I believe another week of this life would drive me mad. And perhaps Arthur is right—perhaps I shall never come back.

I ask myself if I have become such a weakling as that, to desert him when he needs me most. I don't know. I don't recognize myself any longer. . . .

But of course I will be back. There is the translation, for one thing, which is coming along famously. I could never forgive myself for dropping it at the most vital point.

As for Arthur, when I return I intend to give in to him no longer. I will make myself master here and cure him against his will. Fresh air, change of scene, a good doctor, these are the things he needs.

But what is his malady? Is it the influence of this house that has fallen on him like a blight? One might imagine so, since it is having the same effect on me.

Yes, I have reached that point where I no longer sleep. At night I lie awake and try to keep my eyes off the mirror across the room. But in the end I always find myself staring into it—watching the door with the heavy bolts. I long to rise from the bed and draw back the bolts, but I'm afraid.

How slowly the day goes by! The night will never come!

NINE P. M.—Have packed my suitcases and put the room in order. Arthur must be asleep. . . . I'm afraid the parting from him will be painful. I shall leave here at eleven o'clock in order to give myself plenty of time. . . . It is beginning to rain. . . .

OCTOBER 19—At last! It has come! I am mad! I knew it! I felt it creeping on me all the time! Have I not lived in this house a month? Have I not seen? . . . To have seen what I have seen, to have lived for a month as I have lived, one *must* be mad. . . .

It was ten o'clock. I was waiting impatiently for the last hour to pass. I had seated myself in a rocking-chair by the bed, my suitcases beside me, my back to the mirror. The rain no longer fell. I must have dozed off.

But all at once I was wide awake, my heart beating furiously. Something had touched me. I leapt to my feet, and, as I turned sharply, my eyes fell upon the mirror. In it I saw the door just as I had seen it the other night, and the figure fumbling with the bolt. I wheeled around, but there was nothing there.

I told myself that I was dreaming again, that Arthur was asleep in his bed. But I trembled as I opened the door of his room and peered in. The room was empty, the bed not even crumpled. Lighting a match, I groped my way through the bathroom into the library.

The moon had come from under a cloud and was pouring in a silvery flood through the windows, but Arthur was not there. I stumbled back into my room.

The moon was there, too. . . . And the door, the door in the corner was half open. The bolt had been drawn. In the darkness I could just make out a flight of steps that wound upward.

(Please turn to page 800)

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(Continued from preceding page)

I could no longer hesitate. Striking another match, I climbed the back stairway.

When I reached the top I found myself in total darkness, for the blinds were tightly closed. Realizing that the room was probably a duplicate of the one below, I felt along the wall until I came to the gas jet. For a moment the flame flickered, then burned bright and clear.

O God! what was it I saw? A table, thick with dust, and something wrapped in a reddish-brown dressing-gown, that sat with its elbows propped upon it.

How long had it been sitting there, that it had grown more dry than the dust upon the table! For how many thousands of days and nights had the flesh rotted from that grinning skull!

In its bony fingers it still clutched a pencil. In front of it lay a sheet of scratched paper, yellow with age. With trembling fingers I brushed away the dust. It was dated October 19, 1912. It read:

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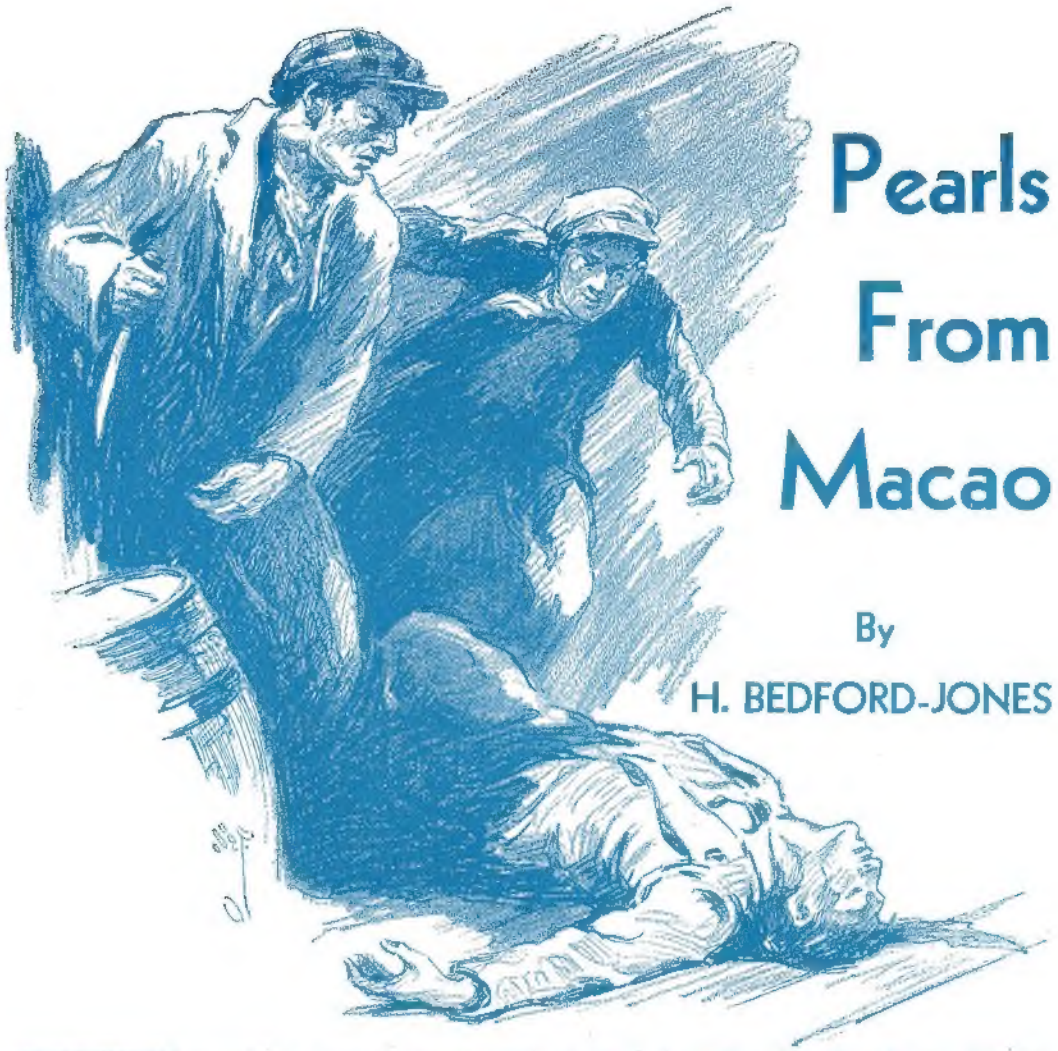

Pearls From Macao

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

CLEGHORN turned into the passage, passed the door of the girl's cabin, shoved open his own door, and reached for the light. His figure was illuminated by the light in the passage; the cabin was pitch-black. As he put out his arm, something moved before him. Every sense alert, he ducked, and swerved quickly to one side.

A furious blow glanced from his head—had he not ducked, it would have brained him. Half stunned, he hurled himself to one side, and collided full with an unseen figure. His hands shot out. A grim and furious satisfaction seized Cleghorn as his fingers sank into the throat of a man, sank in with a terrible grip.

Another smash over the head, and another.

Blinded, he sank in his fingers the deeper. The two struggling figures hit against the door, and it slammed shut. Now there was perfect darkness. In his ears, Cleghorn heard the hoarse, frenzied panting of a man, felt the smashing blows of the other's fists and of some blunt weapon. He had not the slightest idea who it could be, and cared not. This fellow had been waiting here to get him, and had come within an ace of it.

That man, gripped about the throat by those fingers of iron, gasped terribly, struggled with blind and frantic desperation to loose the grip, and could not. His strength began to fail. Again Cleghorn caught a terrific smash over the head, and this fourth blow all but knocked him out.

He lost balance, but did not lose his grip. He dragged down the other with him; they fell heavily, rolled against the closed door, and lay there sprawling. Flashes of fire beat before Cleghorn's eyes. He tried to rise, and could not. He felt his senses slipping away. With an effort, he held himself motionless, let all his strength, all his will-power, flow into his hard-gripped fingers.

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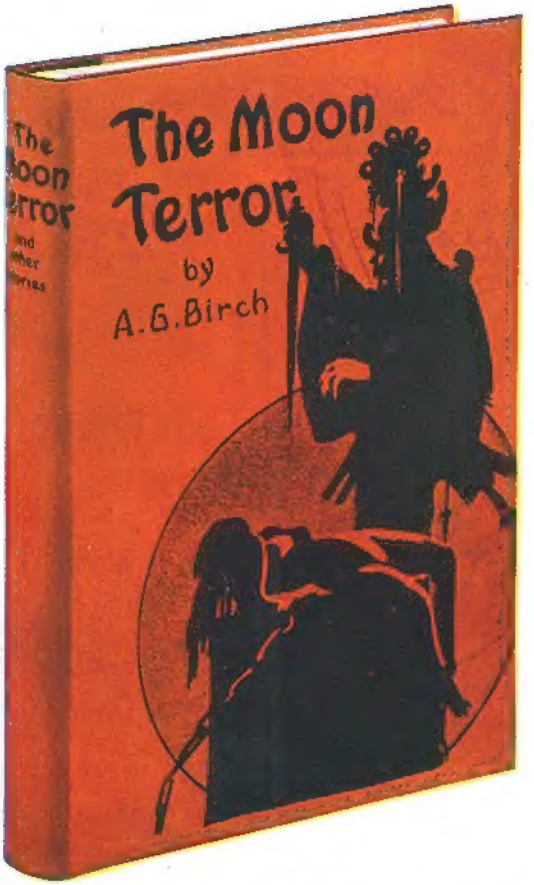

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